

**4W**

PRESS

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*fourW twenty-eight NEW WRITING*

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Editor

David Gilbey

Selection panel

Alex Segal

Tracie Miller

Michel Dignand

Breanna Blundell

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Coordination: Sandra Treble

Design: Adam Bell

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*fourW* calls annually for contributions of previously unpublished prose, poetry and artwork.

Manuscripts and original artwork must be submitted by the end of June each year. Submissions as Microsoft Word documents sent via email are preferred. Writers are asked to limit their submissions to four stories or six poems.

## **Booranga Prizes**

In 2018, all submitted work will be considered eligible for the two Booranga Prizes. The best poem and best short story will be awarded a \$250 prize.

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*fourW twenty-nine*

booranga@csu.edu.au

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**IVY ALVAREZ**

## **Lucky**

An orchid root is not grasping a crumb of bark. But it is. With its finger, slow-footedly. My age is finally true: a hundred and two. No, a hundred and three. Some are old-born, scorned, abhorrent. To not have a father is no detriment. Many have lost theirs by sheer dint, a purposeful accident, misspent, through inattention. Perhaps that was their intention, a paterfamilias dropped between pyramids of fruit, rolling beneath a table, falling out a shirt. Surely they are replaceable. Surely there will be more. What do orphans know? The dubious pleasure of age and snow. My wrinkles wait in the wings, demand a skin regime. The humidity rises, a morning cloak, my ever-love.

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**SOFIUL AZAM**

## **To a Gunman**

Like the mysterious rise of your enemy's language,  
I'm simply out there where love gets voted down,  
where hate crimes are only other things on the rise,  
where misfits like me either remain misfits all their life  
or make headlines only as upturned cockroaches.

If I ever trembled before your gun-barrel, I'd say:  
Before you are done with me, stay with me a bit longer.  
Do me a favor – wait a little with me to watch squirrels  
climb up a tree over there by the lake. Look, how smart  
and death-defying they are, hoarding nuts into that  
tree's gnarled twigs hollowed by termites and swept  
clean by the south wind. The music of ripples on the lake  
soothes their minds like rain. By the way, did you know  
rain is the buzzing of bees vertically landing on flowers?  
The moment I think of flowers I see the redness of roses  
immaculate as the blood you will spill today. It's as  
if you'd by mistake pour coffee onto my writing.

Once I reined-in the leash of my unrest by looking  
at those smart squirrels bringing nuts to their babies.

I often come here to detox my evils. Shower me,  
if you like, with bullets as if to water dying roses of my blood –  
ink for your death script. Take this blood as my offering.  
Even though no holy verse is ever written in blood,  
only love gets bloodstains out as sunlight does darkness.

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## **CHRISTOPHER BARNES**

### ***Lord Byron Joins a Dating Site***

*If solitude*

is ravaged, a fifth wheel

*Release from pain*

to jawache below the surface of revived moons

*The vacant*

amped-up, instinctual, top-to-toe blood-stirring

*Might thank*

this batphone for a sample ring

*We loathe*

the fragile lapse that's unimportance

*Even bliss*

has its palsy to yank

Glossary of slang: Fifth Wheel – Gooseberry; Amped Up – Excited;

Batphone – Cellphone.

***Lord Byron Downloads a Zombie Movie***

*When to their*

hughies on a fuddled gale,

*Shall call my spirit,*

dark Guinness-tinged, pugilistic,

*When, pois'd*

he rip-tides thick speech,

*Or, dark in mist*

marks the spot before an unfermented head.

*Oh! May my shade's*

giddy-pluck veins drain

*To mark the spot*

into a jotted fragment, a pub-crawl swig alone.

*No lengthen'd scroll*

if that with bed-readiness this liver has glued

*My epitaph shall be*

with lurk-remembered charms

*If that*

only bugger-all shall lucidify

*Oh! May no other*

gaffes be misremembered.

Glossary of slang: Hughies – Vomits.

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**ROBERT BEVERIDGE**



# The Poetry Bowl

## The river of ghosts

spatters over rocks

beside the grey city

smells pretty good.

Down by the chicken farm

the river delta

is the poetry bowl

and hundreds of hundreds

of would-be writers

dangle their feet in the misty rushes

move their pens

over nonexistent paper.

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Craig Billingham

### THE MESSENGER

Mrs Henderson claims the young man at her front door was well dressed and handsome. He had a parting and a fringe, a narrow face, and he

was wearing a dark blue canvas jacket with what appeared to be a bleach spot above the left hand pocket. He looked like an Art teacher, she claims, or a

documentary maker, which pleased Mrs Henderson greatly – for some forty

years she'd had a royal crush on David Attenborough.

"Sorry dear," she said, feeling she'd taken too long in getting to the door.

The young man smiled, Mrs Henderson claims, smiled but kept his lips closed. There wasn't much of him – he could have stepped on a garden rake and it would have missed – but what there was, she liked. She claims she expected the young man would ask her to buy a raffle ticket, or to vote for such and such in the upcoming elections, but instead he babbled and was nervous, the shabby talk a mockery of his tidy features. Losing interest – her capacity for tedium was not what it used to be – Mrs Henderson turned her attention to her neighbour's plum tree, surprised how early the sunny-side had blossomed. She claims there was nothing so precocious in her own garden.

"Mrs Flowers thought that I should meet with you," the young man said.

"I beg your pardon?" Mrs Henderson replied.

At that, the young man leaned forward, such that Mrs Henderson detected a trace of rosemary on his breath, which matches the account given by the waitress from *Bethany's*, one of the local cafés – that is, for lunch the young man ordered an entrée size bowl of gnocchi with a sauce of rosemary and sundried tomatoes. He drank tap water.

"Mrs Flowers said that I should meet with you," the young man repeated,

raising his voice a little, and Mrs Henderson claims he looked about him as he spoke.

Although Mrs Henderson doesn't normally use such language, on hearing the name 'Mrs Flowers', the following is what came to mind: So, the nasty little tart got married. She looked to the young man for clarification, but his face offered nothing. The ridgeline of his brow seemed suddenly more pronounced, the features beneath it almost sombre. How old must he have been? Twenty-seven?

Thirty-two? Certainly not so young as he had seemed when she'd opened the door to him. He'd aged visibly, Mrs Henderson claims, headlong through a decade.

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"Mrs Flowers said that we should meet?" Mrs Henderson then asked.

"That's right," the young man said.

"And how do you know Mrs Flowers?"

"I'm to be her son-in-law," the young man answered.

"I didn't even know she had a daughter," Mrs Henderson replied.

The young man remained silent – evidently he had nothing more to say on the matter, not at that particular moment. Mrs Henderson claims that in lieu of further information he offered one of his thin, closed-lipped smiles.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but what does this have to do with me?"

"That's precisely why I'm here," the young man answered.

Mrs Henderson wishes it to be clear that she wanted nothing to do with Lulu Flowers and her 'shenanigans'. But, on the other hand, as she readily admits, the young man had unpicked a stitch inside of her.

"Well in that case," she said, "you'd better come in."

The house was dark and cool, years of damp through winter, and several floorboards in the hallway sagged slightly underfoot. Mrs Henderson claims to remember the young man's footsteps as he walked behind her, in sync with her own step.

Once in the sitting room the young man sat lightly on the edge of Mrs

Henderson's best chair, as though, she claims, he was ambivalent about leaving a lasting impression. He took a great deal of interest in her ornaments – spice jars painted with butterflies and moths, a framed oriental fan above the fireplace and, in the corner, a large antique birdcage containing two impressive yellow paper cranes.

“Home-stay students,” Mrs Henderson said, by way of explanation. “From the hotel school. A Korean girl made those for me, as a leaving present.”

“That seems strange,” the young man remarked.

“In what way?” Mrs Henderson then asked.

“That a Korean would practise a Japanese art,” he said. “You know, considering their history.”

Mrs Henderson claims she had never given this much thought – not the history, nor the cranes. Subsequently she reflected on the young man's comment and wondered whether he was not mistaken about the level of animosity between Japan and Korea – perhaps they had many things in common. Regardless, the young man and Mrs Henderson did not discuss it further, and an awkward pause ensued. During this brief interlude – she uses the word ‘interlude’, but immediately claims it isn't a word she would ordinarily use – the young man shifted about, as though trying to coax more comfort from the chair.

Eventually he said, “The matter concerns your husband.”

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“But my husband's dead,” Mrs Henderson replied.

“Yes, I realise Mr Henderson is no longer with you,” the young man continued.

Mrs Henderson considered what he might have meant. No longer with you? Yes, that was true – her husband had died some eighteen months before, following the last in a flush of debilitating strokes. She mentions he went the way of all the men in his family – clumsily assembled, a drinker, steadily more corpulent despite the physical nature of his work. Mr Henderson, you see, at least according to his wife, had been much the better of Bamberg’s two mechanics. A profitable business, Mrs Henderson claims, but within a year their son, who lacked his father’s charm and enterprise, was struggling to keep the place afloat, yet would not accede to his mother’s wish to sell.

“And what *about* my husband?” Mrs Henderson asked.

“There is no easy way to say this,” the young man said. “You see, Jenny – my fiancé – is your husband’s daughter.”

On hearing this Mrs Henderson felt quite ill, she claims, as though some pool of black milk, kept frozen in her gut for many years, had thawed and set itself to curdle.

“I don’t understand,” she said, although in fact she understood perfectly well.

Mrs Henderson knew about her husband’s ‘carrying on’ with Lulu Flowers.

It had started in 1972, the year their son was born. (Incidentally, the accused was born the night Gough Whitlam came to power.) Sideways glances whenever she went up to town, she claims, and the whispering campaign. Why would you, on your own doorstep? It’ll ruin the son. But, Mrs Henderson claims, the ‘carrying on’ was over by 1975, in time for the Dismissal.

“I have some photographs I can show you,” the young man said, reaching into his shoulder bag.

He retrieved an exercise book, between the pages of which were half a dozen photographs. His movements were quick, Mrs Henderson claims, and before she could protest he was fanning out the photographs so they could be viewed from her perspective.

“Here,” he said. “Please. Take your time.”

Mrs Henderson slid one of the photographs from the young man’s hand, she claims, as though she were an unwilling participant in a magician’s trick. A Polaroid, its white frame discoloured, showed her husband at the beach, smiling, shirtless and tanned, Lulu Flowers lovingly at his shoulder. He was bald, which meant 1983 or later, that being the year he’d bought a set of electric clippers.

Disgraceful, Mrs Henderson claims, and she thought she might be sick.

“And do you know where this was taken?” she asked.

“At Kiama,” the young man answered. “That’s where Mrs Flowers lived,

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after leaving Bamberg. It’s where Jenny – my fiancé – was born. And your husband – Mr Henderson – he used to join them, if he could manage to get away.”

*If he could manage to get away.* The phrase went through her, Mrs Henderson claims, like a pint of battery acid.

“You called her *Mrs Flowers*,” she said. “Is she married?”

“No,” the young man answered. “But in Kiama, where I first met your husband, that’s how they were known: Mr and Mrs Flowers.”

At that point, Mrs Henderson claims, she wanted urgently to be alone, and so she drew the conversation to a close. She is adamant on this point: unlike in

the statement given by the deceased's fiancé – and how could Jenny have known what Mrs Henderson and the young man had been discussing? – there was no talk of inheritance, rightful or otherwise.

“I won't be a moment,” Mrs Henderson claims to have said, to which the young man smiled his smile.

She stood and walked to the kitchen, closing the door behind her. She filled the jug, happy for the noise of running water. Once she had switched it on, she claims, she unpegged her overcoat and placed it across her arm, picked up her handbag from the kitchen bench, collected her keys and purse and phone. She claims she left through the back door, intending to walk into the village, to be away from the young man and the house – ‘the wretched house’ – but as she passed the rosebush, which was showing no signs of life, she changed her mind.

In the laneway she took out her phone and called her son, who at the time was working beneath an old Mercedes, the large shifting spanner at his side.

“Mum,” he said. “What's wrong?”

“There's a young man in the house,” she told him.

“What? What's he want? What the bloody hell does he want?” her son demanded, and Mrs Henderson could hear his temper rising.

“Money,” she said. “He wants our money.”

Mrs Henderson then put the phone back into her handbag, hopeful her son would not be excessively violent – with him, she claims, things have a tendency to happen much too quickly. She claims she thought of calling back in order to discourage him, but, just like his father, he did not like for her to meddle.

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**JULIE BRIGGS**



# White Christmas

## Out on the street they

cling together like two  
adolescent kangaroos  
dazzled by the street light  
and dancing.

A day of empties and  
the startled heads of  
compliant prawns  
chucked in a wheeled bin  
has brought them here.

Women watch in  
doorways as tee-shirts  
loose, they parry and break  
lean and stream against  
a Telstra van.

Their cooling puddle nudging  
leaf litter along the gutter  
down to the corner where  
an LCD-lit Santa sprawls

beer in hand, sack open  
amber bottles spilling out  
across a hot tin roof.

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Erwin Cabucos

## LIGHTS OF DIFFERENT COLOURS

Christy dabs her eyes to dry her tears with the flannelette sheet as she pulls it up to her neck, tucking herself in tightly against the creeping chill of Hong Kong's winter. From her space under the laundry bench, between the washing

machine and the refrigerator, she can see the kaleidoscopic glow reflected on Kowloon Bay, especially if she tilts her head up from her pillow. She inhales the peace of the moment, disturbed only by the intermittent whirring of the

refrigerator motor, but she has learned to love the noise as a symbol of where she is and what she is doing for her family.

When she started work five years ago as a maid for the Chen Family, on

the twenty-ninth floor of a building in Admiralty, the refrigerator noise used to rob her of sleep. But it's become a symbol of the importance of her job, of her ability to feed her family back in the Philippines, to send her daughter to study nursing at the Davao Doctors' College, and to save money so she can send her son to a university soon. She has learned to accept the things she used to hate.

She yawns and rubs her feet together for warmth as she does every night

before she falls asleep. Then she makes the sign of the cross – something she's done all her life as she thinks of the people she loves and prays for their safety.

Finally, she looks at the picture of her family on her iPhone. It is the last image she wants imprinted on her mind as she closes her eyes. As she outlines the faces of her loved ones with a finger, the latest FaceTime messages from her daughter Melody pop up: "I love you, Mang. *Indi lang magkabalaka sa amon dire, kay*

*okay lang kami, don't worry about us, we are fine here. Mag capping na ako sa sunod bulan, I'll start my work experience next month. Love you man daw siling ni Papang kag ni Jun-Jun. Didto ko kaina sa Carmen, Papang and Jun-Jun say "I Love You", I was at home with them earlier today."*

"I love you too, Melody," Christy whispers. She feels her eyes start to water again. But before the flood of tears can come she stands to get some cold water from the fridge and gulps the liquid down, staring at the shimmering lights that filter between the buildings and the bay. The colours that pierce the darkness give her a sense of triumph, knowing that, despite their poverty and her having to work as a domestic helper far from home, she is able to pay the expensive tuition fees and textbooks needed for her daughter's education – which only the well-to-dos can afford in her home town. Holding the glass, Christy leans on 12

the washing machine and stares at the City, hoping that one day her hard work will pay off and Melody will be the one to send her brother to college. Then, at last, she and her husband will be able to retire with a little help from their two children.

She sighs at the thought that behind the array of buildings, two-hour

flight from this island-city, her family is also going to sleep. She wishes she were there now to advise Jun-Jun, her sixteen-year-old son, to stay away from bad influences, especially drugs.

The knock at the door jolts her. Christy puts on her slippers and slides her jumper over her shoulders as she walks through the kitchen and lounge room

to get to the front door. She thinks it must be Kwok Wei, the Chen's only child, who always ignores his parents' instruction to study hard and to come home

on time. He's always been a concern for Mr. and Mrs. Chen, and was even

suspected of having been involved in illegal drugs last year, at the age of only fifteen.

The teenager's body rolls on the floor as Christy swings the door open.

"Kwok Wei, are you okay?"

His eyes are half-open. He struggles to stand, then he braces himself with one hand as he sits on the floor.

Before Christy finishes her sentence a pinkish goo escapes from his mouth, spilling on his shirt and onto the carpet. Christy's eyes go wide. "*Ay, yudiputa nga bata ni a, pa kuskusun pa gid ko sang carpet*", cursing the prospect of de-staining and deodorizing the carpet – one of many things she hates about this job. "Sorry, Auntie Christy." He grabs the side of the door to pull himself upright and wobbles towards his bedroom.

Mrs. Chen appears, trembling in anger. "Could you be any more stupid?"

Drinking at fifteen is not only illegal but extremely dangerous. You could have died!" Her high-pitched voice pierces Christy's ears. Mrs. Chen's hand flies onto her son's head; his face twists from the impact. "Clean yourself. You are grounded! No more Internet. No more games. No more pocket money..."

Christy starts to sweep up the slime, trying not to gag from the smell.

"M-ma, it was only because of my friend's request. I couldn't reject him.

He only turns eighteen once," the teen mumbles. He slips to the floor, leaning on the side of his bed.

Mr. Chen comes out in his boxer shorts. "Alright, listen," he says, pointing at his son. "This should be the last time I see you drunk. None of this stupid thing from now on, do you understand?"

Kwok Wei nods while looking down.

Mr. Chen shakes his head. "It's probably bad influences from those friends

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of yours. Stop hanging out with them – kids. They don't do you any good."

"It's not about his friends, *lóuhgùng*. I know their families." Mrs. Chen scuttles towards the teenager, avoiding the spot Christy is trying to clean. She stabs his

head with her forefinger. "It's from his stupid head!" She crosses her arms and breathes rapidly. "Christy, can you also help him clean himself?" She asks in a way that makes it an order. "He's a mess!" Mrs. Chen hurries back to their bedroom, muttering and cursing at why, despite the other things she has to worry about, what with the budgeting and forecasting she has to submit to her company tomorrow, the heavens also saw fit to give her a child that brings hell into her life.

"Get your act together, son!" Mr. Chen says as he follows his wife to their bedroom.

After drying the floor, Christy now sprays the spot with a carpet deodorizer.

She hurries to the bathroom and turns on the water before going to the

teenager's bedroom to undress him. She pinches the hem of his shirt, pulls it up and throws it in the washing basket. Kwok Wei stands up, holding on to the side of his bedroom door, and pushes his jeans and underpants down. She hasn't helped him undress or change for years but tonight is different, confirming

the fact that parenting teenagers does bring unpleasant surprises at times. She cannot help but notice his uncircumcised penis on the patch of black pubic

hair he has grown since she last saw him naked, and she hands him a towel to cover himself. When he was young she would wrap him with the towel, but

now the teenager snatches it from her fingers, realising the awkwardness of

exposing himself to her. As she follows him to the bath, Christy recalls her son and the time she has lost in not being there to care for him, and perhaps to get angry with him when she needs to, like most parents do when their children

misbehave. Why, she asks herself, does she have to lease her love to others to show its genuineness?

Kwok Wei hands the towel to her and dunks himself in the bath. He

stretches his legs while resting his head on the tiles, letting out a groan as the warm water soothes him. He closes his eyes and cups some water in his hands

to pour on himself. Steam bellows to the ceiling. Christy lets some air in, conscious not to open the window widely. She squirts liquid soap onto a sponge and hands it to the boy. He simply dangles it, dripping soap over the edge of the bath. She takes it and rubs it on his chest, neck and face. He closes his eyes and moves his chin as she scrubs his skin.

“Thank you, Auntie Christy,” Kwok Wei’s voice is still slurred. He lifts his hands and wraps them around Christy’s shoulders, wetting her blouse as he pulls her close. “Thank you very much; you’re always here for me, more so than my mother.”

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Christy sees the redness and the brimming of tears in his half-closed eyes.

She is touched by the words of her employers’ son who she feels could easily be her own after the years she has spent helping bring him up. “Don’t cry, Kwok Wei. That’s what I’m here for. Your parents pay me to do this. Wipe your tears.”

She stands up to get his toothbrush and squirts some toothpaste on it before handing it to him. “C’mon, brush your teeth before going to bed.”

“You may just be doing your job here for money but what you do goes far beyond what Ma’s and Pa’s money could buy.” He pours some more water on his chest. “You’re more than that. A-and, thanks for being here.”

“That’s okay, Kwok Wei. I guess your parents are right. Don’t drink, you’re too young for that.”

“You know my friends didn’t really force me to drink. You have no idea how much I hate my stupid life! I don’t think there is any purpose to it.”

“Don’t say that.”

“I left the party and walked and walked, feeling sorry for myself and

thinking about ending everything. You know...”

“Oh, Kwok Wei.”

“I called my friends but they were busy.” He splashes some water on his face and sweeps it down with his palm. “I didn’t realise I was walking along the busway at Harcourt Road. I was beeped at. I thought I was going to get run over.” “Really?”

“I was pulled over by the police near Admiralty. Luckily they didn’t arrest me. Then I paid someone to buy me some beer and I sculled a few more bottles of San Miguel on my way home.”

“You know my son is roughly in the same age as you. He wants to be a police officer after hearing that our new president will increase the salaries of the police.” She wipes the boy’s feet but looks at his face. “If you want, you can come with me to the Philippines during my next holiday. But it’s very hot there.”

“I like being in warm places.”

“Not only that; we are also poor. Our house is very poor. You know – no flush toilets, no hot water. We only have hard beds made of bamboo.”

“My teacher said it doesn’t matter whether you are rich or poor. What matters is you’re happy. Are you happy, Auntie Christy?”

“Yes, Kwok Wei, I’m generally happy. I feel sad too, but more happy than sad. I’m happy because I can support my family in the Philippines out of poverty. At least they have something to eat.”

“That’s really good. I’m sure your kids are really proud of you, and your husband, too.”

“Yep.”

“And you shouldn’t worry about being poor then. You know what you ought to do in our life. You make others happy. Really, you are doing things that make you happy.”

“I guess so. I guess, that’s life.” Christy smiles and breathes in deeply.

“I don’t know what I want, Auntie Christy. What do you think I should do?

I am pretty good at Math.”

“You have plenty of opportunities, Kwok Wei. Your parents have money, your country is rich and you have access to good education. Use these things to your advantage, to make good future. Stop thinking of negative, nonsense things.”

Christy mentions about possible courses he should consider, and she makes him agree to see his school counsellor the following day. Eventually, she tucks him in bed and turns the lights off before walking back to her narrow mattress.

She hears the tell-tale moans of pleasure from Mr. and Mrs. Chen’s room at the far end of the apartment and thinks about her husband, and how she

wishes she could be with him right now. She wraps herself once more with the flannelette sheet before spreading the quilt on top of her, and ducks her head under the covers before checking the photograph of her family one last time

on her iPhone. It’s 1.50 am; in four hours she has to get up again to make her employers’ breakfast before they go to work. She thinks about what she will

wear to take Kwok Wei to the school counsellor. Perhaps she shouldn’t go for a motherly look, just jeans and a white top – the one with ‘Undefeated’ printed on it that Melody sent her last Christmas. Kwok Wei’s words to her tonight



are like balm that massages her aching back and feet, giving her warmth and strength in the isolation from those she loves.

Unexpectedly her phone vibrates softly and a text comes up. It is her husband, Lando: “I miss you, Chris. I love you, *palangga*.”

She presses the auto response button that returns her usual message to him – her love. She hugs the phone to her chest and closes her eyes.

She is already asleep as the image of her family fades from the screen.

Streaks of Kowloon light reflect on her face from the side of the fridge as its motor runs once more, unnoticed in the night.

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## **JOAN CAHILL**

### ***One-Eyed Trust***

He is handsome

the man with the wherewithal

to kill.

*Not wearing the outfit*

*I would have chosen*

*to die in.*

Staff flutter around him

as he mixes the cocktail

for a small death.

*A dark blue vein*

*and just a cannula*

*between twilight and me.*

Drugged icy air, dazzling light

I am awake and aware

but the power is not mine.

*The ceiling is flawless*

*trolley wheels rumble*

*my neck hurts.*

Covered, no longer a person

I am reduced to one eye

a Hitchcock horror film.

*I hope that I can still see*

*when the grape*

*has been peeled.*

Alive and pirate-eyed

cup of tea and sandwich

the finest ever tasted.

*I overhear that in one day*

*he saved twenty seven.*

*A whole bunch.*

17

**CHLOË CALLISTEMON**

## X

midday pauses, pants.

it's a ten litre day.

we throw cooees and warnings

bounce them off sandstone

drop them deep

into spinifex-stuffed holes.

green needles drip sap.

skinks writhe tails:

detachable lures squirming

with a fish-hook sheen.

we circle sandstone towers

thread fissures

pry overhangs for red figures

serpents, slip-worn stone.

we climb knuckled fault lines

when we find anything

pause in cool stone mouths

in thrall to every mark

scraped bloody by toothed ledges

ready to fall.

silky rock licks the back of my neck

shadows breathe out across scorched skin.

disturbed moths open and close like lips.

I stare up at the silent scene

swarming the stippled canvas.

18

**JOHN CAREY**

## Post Truth

There's a ban in downtown Pyongyang  
on the public possession of onions  
designed for performance enhancement  
in the non-spontaneous displays of grief  
that are mandatory at State Funerals.

Street-market-savvy sniffer-dogs  
slalom through the throng in the Square  
barking at carry-bags and handkerchiefs  
and following through with sharp attacks  
on sensitive parts of the body. Sources  
close to the White House have whispered  
that such procedures may be used to monitor  
mourners at a putative memorial service  
if ever Navy Seals in white coats whisk  
their leader away for a session of triage  
in the loading-bay at Bellevue, thence to a  
place whence no traveller ever returns, a coup  
dear to the heart of hard-core Obamists.

This may be a fake news item bombing

us from Montenegro or Fox News or it  
just might be a double-bluff. Trust no-one.

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Carol Chandler

WATCHED

**O**ut of the corner of his eye, he noticed a gold chain, another memento from when things were more in control, nothing to do with the present,

at least that's what he told himself. Breathing in deeply, he walked out to the balcony, that sensation of panic rising in his chest again. He leant over the railing, noticing Angela's flat below.

She'd glanced up at him the day before and seemed to sense something wrong. The corner of her flat was visible now, a glimpse of a small table; circular, a wrought iron chair, and a trail of bougainvillea. The darkness of the corner was just out of reach. She'd placed the table and two chairs in an orderly way and he wondered what kind of person she was, whether she had a partner or was alone.

He remembered the greyness of his prison cell, how he was always on guard and then, something bright, a shiny star on a packet he'd kept, pathetic, but at the same time strangely meaningful.

The sandy flats of the river stretched away towards the sea, the ripples of the current flowing smoothly. It seemed to beckon, the river and the mangroves around the island. A door had been pushed open downstairs, and what looked like hens scabbled around in the yard. You could see through to the block next door. A woman joined a young girl, hanging up brightly coloured dresses. The child stood near her, holding on to her skirt.

Walking inside, he sat down and felt the ridge of the knife under the

cushion, the blade, sharp and metallic against his fingers.

Someone knocked at the door. It was Molly, the young girl from down the hall. She stared back with large dark eyes, body frail, matchstick thin, gangly arms and legs.

“What’s the matter?” he asked gruffly, trying to stay detached.

She shifted her feet, staring back at him. He knew her mother, Yasmin, liked him because he’d helped rescue some of her things from her ex-partner’s place.

Molly was still shuffling around nervously and looking away, a hint of cunning in her eyes.

“Mum’s making lunch. Do you want to come?”

Uncertain whether to go, he followed her down the hallway, curious why

Yasmin had invited him. She greeted him at the door wearing her special occasion dress, a theatrical outfit, sewn from a filmy material daubed with fake jewels.

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Whenever she wore it she seemed to glide down the street as if nothing touched her. Her slim build, dark eyes and cloud of hair gave her a fragile appearance, like one of those waif-like models that didn’t really appeal to him. The living room was draped with streamers. Some of them hung over a large photographic portrait of Molly’s father, who seemed to look out at the world in a morose way. He’d been killed in a car crash and Yasmin had raised Molly by herself.

A heavy smell of tobacco drifted from another room and Angela, the woman from downstairs, walked in. He remembered the bougainvillea on her balcony, and the carefully placed table, the trails of blossoms that seemed to cascade from her flat to the one below. There was something at ease about her, a fluidity to her movements. She was wearing a dress of white cloth that made her look like a bride.



A girl of about thirteen walked in. She moved with a slight limp, holding onto the table.

“Mick, this is my daughter, Calliope,” said Angela.

Calliope glanced away quickly when she saw him looking at her. The way she retreated, a coldness in her gaze, the adults must have said something. She frowned at him with washed out blue eyes, a hint of disapproval on her face. Then he remembered Angela worked with Tess, his ex-girlfriend, whom he hadn't seen since he'd been in jail.

He was used to controlling things in prison and didn't like what was happening here. The position of Angela's table on the balcony and the orderly way she'd placed the chairs, something about her manner was troubling him. Yasmin began talking about some fireworks at the Bay, the spinning catherine wheels and rockets. It was as if he wasn't in the room. A dull resentment simmered and his mood began to sour. The way Calliope moved her arms whirling them like catherine wheels put him on edge. Why had Yasmin invited him to lunch? The atmosphere shifted and Angela began talking about problems down at Calliope's school, a kid who was acting strangely.

“What's he been doing?” asked Yasmin, sighing in an exasperated way.

“Punching people, spitting and making strange comments, a bit sexual, you know what I mean. He's Paul Donohoe's kid, well his step kid, anyway.”

He flinched when she said 'Paul Donohoe'. They'd had a long acquaintance before jail.

“Donohoe?”

“Yeah, he’s with Suzanne. She does nothing with her kid. It’s terrible what happened with her husband, Benjy. No one knows what happened to him but you know Benjy quite well, don’t you Mick?” She turned to face him, a steely look in her eyes.

He said nothing, not wanting to talk about Paul or Benjy. No-one knew what he’d done to Benjy, as far as they were concerned he’d disappeared. Angela  
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turned away, annoyed that he wasn’t saying anything and he frowned at her, thinking that she had to be watched.

“Why is Paul with Suzanne?” he asked.

“I don’t know. It’s because Benjy left but they’ve never lived together.”

He was conscious of her bitchy tone, and wondered what was happening with Paul, why Suzanne had gotten involved with him. Paul had been a good friend of Benjy’s. It was no surprise the kid was a mess if Paul was involved but then if he was Benjy’s kid, it was no surprise either. Benjy had been living by himself when he’d killed him. He and Suzanne had separated. He’d gone inside for armed robbery, not Benjy’s murder. Benjy owed him money and he went there to see him but it had all gone wrong.

“I didn’t know Benjy was gone,” he lied.

“Yeah, he left a while ago,” said Angela.

“It must have been while I was away.”

“No, it was before.”

He was enjoying being ironic with her, watching her reaction, playing with them both. It was too big a temptation. They knew nothing about Benjy at all.

“I wonder why he left,” said Angela. “Suzanne’s difficult too.”

“I heard he was living somewhere else,” he said, playing with a fork on the table, standing it up, then flipping it around.

Angela’s expression shifted slightly and he felt uncomfortable, thinking that she might know something. She stared at him and he glanced away, then he smiled slyly. She was leaning in her chair, studying him as if she wanted to say something but knew she shouldn’t. She seemed unafraid of him now. He’d been conscious when listening to her that her voice had the same ironic tone he’d been using himself and he said nothing, annoyed that she seemed to be playing him at his own game.

“Tess, hasn’t been back long but she keeps to herself,” she said. “No-one knows what’s happening with her.”

He began studying the children who were playing in a corner. He didn’t want to talk about Tess. He hadn’t been back here long himself, only three weeks and his life had become a mess.

He eyed Angela cautiously now. “I haven’t seen her,” he said, knowing that it was none of her business. He noticed Calliope smirking and wondered what they’d been talking about. Feeling irritated, he was going to get up and leave but then he remembered he was supposed to be staying for lunch. Yasmin looked at him unhappily and he watched her get up and move around the table as she served some food. He picked up his fork and jabbed at the meat, putting it in his mouth. It was spicy, so different to the meals he’d eaten in prison.

Yasmin could see him grimacing and looked upset.

“I’ve been thinking of setting up a stall at Manderley,” said Angela. “Vintage stuff. You should look into it, Yasmin, selling stuff at the markets. Suzanne told me you used to sell pots.”

Yasmin’s mood had changed. She seemed relaxed, eager to discuss day-to-day things. He toyed with the food, not listening to them. He was thinking about Tess, what he was going to say to her, the way she’d been so upset the last time he’d seen her. She’d wanted no contact with him and he hadn’t seen her since he’d been released from jail.

“There’s some good clothes there, and food,” Angela was saying.

They talked on about the markets but something had changed in Angela.

She was looking at Calliope from time to time as if she needed to get going.

“I might go up north sometime,” said Angela.

She began describing the manta rays she’d seen on dives, the undulating movement of the rays and their barbed tails. There was a slight edge to her expression.

She was beautiful if she scrubbed up a bit. Yasmin looked a little flushed as if she’d been drinking and he noticed a wine glass nearby.

“I remember when you were last here, Mick,” said Yasmin.

He could tell she was aware of what was happening between him and

Angela and didn’t like it. Her voice was a little tense.

“You said you were looking for work. How long were you away?”

He glanced around, realising this was code for ‘how long were you inside?’

The euphemism irritated him. The children had left the room and were in the bedroom.

“Five years.”

Her bright-eyed enthusiasm annoyed him, the slight sing-song tone in her voice. He could see Angela smiling as if she knew it too.

“Yeah, I don’t like talking about the past,” he said, picking up on Angela’s amused expression. He noticed her long graceful neck but her lips were a little thin and sloped down slightly.

Yasmin glanced away, a hint of melancholy in her eyes. They’d been out a few times and at first he’d been interested in her but there could be nothing between them. “Yasmin. I’m sorry I can’t stay. I have to meet someone at the Bay.” He stood up, scraping his chair.

“Can I get a lift?” Angela asked. Her voice had a laconic tone but her eyes told a different story. He remembered the ordered chairs and table on her balcony, the precision and tidiness. There was something calculating about her.

“Yeah, I have to see someone,” he said, curious why she was asking. “But I can drop you down.”

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He walked to the door, noticing a man down the hallway, hair curling across his forehead, eyes wide like a cat. The corridor was dark, a dusty alcove at the end, a door to a flat whose owner he was unfamiliar with. Torn fly strips were at the entrance, and an umbrella stand stood to the side with a design like a Chinese dragon.

He pulled out his car keys, turning to look at Angela. She began walking ahead of him and he studied the curves of her body, the pale shadows on her

arms. “Who’s that?” he asked, watching the man disappear down the hall.

“He’s a friend of a friend,” she said, glancing back.

They walked downstairs and out to the road and he studied the mangroves across the river. He watched Angela closely as she walked towards the car, the long line of her body, the curve of her hips.

Her body reminded him of Tess’s and he began focusing on her.

Climbing into the car, he glanced across as Angela climbed in beside him.

They began driving towards town, and he studied the ocean, an intense blue, waves a delicate white on the crests. He began to unwind with the movement of the car, but the denseness of the crowds made him nauseous again. He remembered Benjy’s shocked look as he walked inside the house, the mark of blood on his chest. Crowds of people were moving rapidly along the esplanade.

An urge to get back to his room intensified or at least to not get out of the car, but he kept driving towards the pub. People were standing nearby. Breathing deeply, he pulled up outside. He glanced over at Angela and she looked away.

When she turned back, he knew that she had to be watched.

Excerpt Novel in Progress

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**SUE CLENNELL**

# **Frida**

Papaya, passionfruit, mango,

lush between my legs.

Monkey on my shoulder,

telling me of Diego's latest

sperm receptacles.

He is my third eye, my spinal rod.

Mix the salt from my tears with paint.

Ah Diego, I don't rely on you alone

for love, although all roads are uphill

and all paths gravel.

I live in an enclosed space

five feet by five feet surrounded by a frame,

like meat hung from a hook.

Hang me where you like,

I am already strung.

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**LUCY COUGHRAN**

# Hera

The goddess of the gods cannot save you

She is too busy purging mistresses

Her body is a myth but her chains are tangible

Hera governs the certificate that keeps his hands around your throat

And inside you

She cannot save you because you signed it, you said "I do"

You signed away your life to a tall dark evil

So the blood and the broken dry wall against your back is your own fault

What he has done to you is written on your skin in cursive letters

Deep black and purple ink stains your white powder face

Your lips bleed from the snakes' kiss

You scream, oh god, you scream

Terrified of his poison and equally terrified of anyone hearing your pleas

His storm of anger vibrates and shatters your bones

You've lost in the game of words and limbs

His I'm Sorrys and I Love Yous scrape against your chest like broken glass

His arms around you as you lie in bed facing the wall feel like

Suffocation and empty lungs

And you close your eyes for what you hope is your final dream



**MICHAEL CRANE***A Café in Marrakesh for Emma*

And then there was you, smiling at the races,  
grinning at the fashionistas prowling the stage,  
live on television watched by me  
and a hundred men blinded by your charm.

And there you were, lying on the bed fully clothed,  
hair on the pillow, naked of ambition and greed,  
reading a story you had written with glimpses from your world,  
fractured and unravelling the mystery of love.

And there you were, sitting at a café in Marrakesh.  
eating the remnants of a lost weekend,  
on a night boat in Sydney Harbour soothed by the waves  
on a train beside the Hawkesbury River listening to music.

And there you were, singing on a stage  
backed by a pop band playing 'Auld Lang Syne',  
dancing in veils, removing one at a time,  
standing bravely in the spotlight as the police charged in.

And there you were, baking cakes for the launch  
of a book promising brave new voices,

written by shadows that ventured to your world  
defeated by your laughter and delicate words.  
And there was me, waiting for your call  
standing at the phone with rain in my hair  
cobwebs on my hands as the ship leaves the port  
as the shallow waves of your heart slowly surround me.

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Louise D'Arcy

#### ALEX AND MAX GO FOR A WALK

It was a nice dog as dogs go, which wasn't all that far, according to Alec. It had tufty ears and white eyebrows and sat with its head cocked on one side in polite enquiry. It had a label tied to its collar with string.

*Hello! I'm Max. I'm a very friendly dog and I'm all yours!*

"Like fuck you are," thought Alec and he turned on his heel and went back inside, shutting the door. Tufty ears, eyebrows, cutesy label, the whole thing had Cindy written right through the middle of it like a stick of rock.

Alec's phone rang on and off all evening. In the end Alec turned it off and went round every room shutting the curtains. He pretended he was a paparazzi-hounded rapper rather than a grown man hiding from his girlfriend. Then he remembered he had an open house the next morning. That never happened to Kanye, he bet. He collected empty beer cans and jocks and paused a long moment to study the bathroom. Looked fine to him.

The next morning when Alec opened the door to the real estate agent at

nine, Max was still sitting there. He had shat on the mat, not such a friendly gesture, Alec thought, before he noticed that Max was tied by a very short lead to the gas main and had had no choice. He felt a stir of pity for him then. Cindy had that effect on him, too. Pity was what got him in this mess in the first place.

“That’ll need clearing up,” said the Real Estate Agent coldly.

They were never going to hit it off. Alec hated him on sight, even before he put his sunglasses on the top of his head.

“You’re going out, aren’t you?”

“No, thought I’d just hop back into bed.”

“Not a good idea. Prospective renters like the place to themselves. They like to imagine themselves living in the home.”

“And they can’t do that with me lying in bed having a wank is what you’re saying?”

But the real estate man was looking at his clip board and gave no sign of hearing.

After that there seemed no point in hanging around so he picked up his wallet and left. He hadn’t meant to take Max but he couldn’t think what else to do with him. Max walked close to his leg, though he kept looking around in a hopeful way that Alec found mildly insulting.

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At the milk bar they hit their first snag. Max refused to go in and Alec found pulling on a lead when the dog on the end of it was sitting down both ineffective and crowd-pulling.

“That’s cruel, that is.”

“Tie him up outside, love.”

Attach yourself to a dog and the whole world thinks it has the right to talk to you, thought Alec. They fall over themselves to offer you advice like you're five and out for the first time without your mum. Someone even took the lead from his hand and led Max to the streetlamp. Max followed gratefully and lay down with a sigh.

Alec bought a paper and left by the back entrance. Easy as that. If only

Cindy were that simple. If so he'd gladly have tied her to a post and left by an alternative exit.

Cindy. By now half his stuff should have been packed up and unpacked

round at her place. For two months at least he'd simply refused to talk about it whenever she brought it up, which was often. Unfortunately she'd taken

his silence for acquiescence and his flat was listed before he realised what was happening. In a gesture of welcome she'd even cleared her crappy dried flower arrangements off a bookshelf to make room for his books. She made such a fuss about it you'd have thought she'd donated her life savings to fight world poverty.

It made him shitty.

"That's a wild idea," he'd said, "using a bookshelf for books." He bet even

Max would have got it.

Max. It wasn't Max's fault she was a moron. And Max hadn't asked to be

bought and delivered to his door. He'd made no demands on anyone. And

when you thought about it, Max had pretty simple needs in life: food, water, shelter, a bit of love and attention. It wasn't much to ask for. Max was starting to sound like his mum after a couple of glasses of sherry. Alec went back and got him. As he turned the corner past the shop that sold cane furniture, he found himself worried that Max wouldn't be there. Max was.

Max scored a basket from the cane shop. The woman who served them was

very nervous about Max, who sat and stared mournfully at her the whole way

through the transaction. She kept her distance, pointing out the baskets from behind the counter. When asked to try out the basket for size Max had done so, sitting primly in the middle, his tail wrapped round himself like a cat. This made the woman smile and she came out and looked on the verge of patting him. “He’ll need a cushion for that,” she said.

Cushions for dog baskets were unbelievably expensive at the pet shop.

Max wasn’t allowed inside to help choose, a state of affairs that struck Alec as  
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ridiculous beyond anything Cindy had ever made a stand on, even including *feng shui* and baths by candlelight. He chose one through the front window and paid with the last of his cash.

He turned for home carrying a paper, the basket and a large cushion covered in cartoon bone-patterned fabric. Shit, he thought, hope no-one I know sees me. Inevitably he met Dale round the next corner.

“Alec!”

Alec and Dale had once been footy mates, then golf mates, then Cindy had arrived and Saturday mornings were given over to marathon shag sessions formerly, then of late, shopping expeditions. Alec hadn’t phoned Dale in a long time. Now he saw Dale, he realised how much he’d missed his company.

“How’ve you been?”

Dale looked smug for a second, “OK, things were a bit rough for a while but I got there.”

He looked almost on the verge of saying more but the moment passed.

They moved on to safer ground – no, hadn’t had a round of golf in ages, yes, car

going like a beauty, no, hadn't had a good night on the piss for months. How long since they'd last spoken, Alec wondered?

"A year at least, mate. Thought you were dead. Got a woman?"

Alec didn't want to talk about Cindy. He bet Dale knew her – they all knew everyone. Came of living in a small country town all your life and never going anywhere. He didn't want to hear Dale telling him what he already knew, that Cindy was bad news.

"Did have. Well, still have, but I'm just about to piss her off."

Dale gave him a look. It was one Alec hadn't seen before.

"She gave you the dog, right? Next thing'll be babies, so get out while you still can! Jen was the same, a rabbit, then a kitten and then before I knew it, it was antenatal classes lined up for Thursday nights."

"So you gave her the push just in time then?"

"Tayla was born six months ago, best thing that ever happened to me."

Jesus, he was tearing up. Alec looked down at Max for help. Max refused to catch his eye.

"Well, mate, better keep going. Jen works on Saturdays now and me and Tayla spend the day together."

Dale walked off. Alec thought he looked relieved to be getting away. Well, fuck him, he'd always been a crap golfer anyway.

Alec and Max walked past a hairdresser's. There was a woman standing outside the door having a cigarette. She had a towel round her neck and bits of silver foil wrapped round clumps of hair. When Max paused to sniff her legs she blew a lungful of smoke down at him. There was a strange hiatus, as if the 30

world had paused for a moment and then she took another drag and Max and Alec walked on.

Hairdressers made him think of his mum. Her hair appointments were written into the fabric of family life as immovably as Christmas or Grand Final day. Tuesdays at 2pm. Yet she was there at the school gates every day at three.

He could picture her now, a bag of biscuits in her hand for his afternoon tea, the other hand waving, or self- consciously patting the new hair-do if it was a Tuesday. She wore the same coat every winter and the same two dresses every summer. He couldn't have said even then what they looked like, he just knew he knew them.

Max halted suddenly and Alec nearly lost his grip on the basket. There was another dog, a white one, much bigger than Max. It looked like it would be more at home attached to a sled in the Arctic Circle. It was very interested in checking Max out. Max seemed simultaneously terrified and desperate to say hello. The other dog was on a long lead and circled around Max. Within seconds their leads were tangled and Max was growing increasingly agitated. "It's OK, he's very friendly!" Normally Alec would have flirted with this woman – she was well within his demographic, but Max started yelping and Alec was struggling to hang on to him.

The paper and basket went first and then the cushion. The basket rolled across the pavement and came to rest in an antiques shop doorway. The cushion nearly tripped up an old lady who stopped to glare. Alec started to sweat.

"Just let them say hello and we'll be on our way."

Who was this woman? What right did she have to let her dog bully Max?

It was intent on jamming its nose up Max's arse and Max was circling faster and faster. The lead was cutting into Alec's hand and he shifted his grip on it. The lead streaked out of his hand and in a second Max was gone, racing up the street at a speed that belied his comfortable exterior.

"Max! Come back!"

Bugger cool, this was serious – Max was heading for the highway where

a line of semis waited to turn him into strawberry jam. Alec started to run, abandoning basket and cushion.

By the first intersection Alec was panting. The lights were with him and he

kept going. At the next the lights were red and he stood bent double, vacuuming oxygen. On he went until the shops ran out and the park lay ahead, the other side of the highway. Alec could see Max now, his tail clamped between his legs, his whole body low to the ground.

Max streaked across the highway and Alec closed his eyes. When no sound

of air brakes or tyre squeal came he opened them in time to see Max run straight into the park and disappear. Fuck.

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Alec was ropeable with Max now. When he caught the little shit he'd be in for it. He waited at the lights to cross the highway, conscious he'd never stood beside the road before, never felt the rush of air as the B Doubles went by, or smelt the diesel. He crossed under the eye of a woman in a four wheel drive

waiting at the lights. Ordinarily, Alec would have given her his cheeky boy grin but today there were more important matters in hand. He crossed the road and went in through the park gate, calling for Max.

It was a fruitless exercise and Alec began to wonder if Max even knew he

was Max. Max was probably Cindy's idea, named him after her favourite teddy

bear or an Indian mystic or something. Max himself most likely answered to



Rover or Rusty. Who'd know? Still, you'd think he'd recognise the voice by now, stupid dog.

Alec found him behind the big clump of bamboo in the far corner. He was quivering and licked Alec's hand over and over. After that Alec found he'd lost heart for the promised telling-off. He sat down beside Max for a while and they watched the lunchtime crowd gathering in the shady spots, unwrapping sandwiches and taking off their shoes. Max whimpered and Alec wondered if he was hungry. How often did dogs eat? Three times a day, every other day? Or were they like lions – one good antelope carcass set them up for a week?

Come to think of it, he was hungry too. Alec got up and Max hauled himself to his feet as well. But before moving off Max stretched front and back, sinking back on his haunches to stretch his front legs, toes splayed, and then in reverse for the back ones, one at a time. Then he shook himself and they were off. Don't mind me, thought Alec, don't let me rush you.

They stopped at the first café they passed. Alec tied Max's lead to a table leg outside and went in.

“How's Max then?”

It was the cane shop lady he realised as he turned round, after a horrified moment when he thought it was Cindy.

They took their lunch outside and she seemed happy to join him at Max's table. Max was circumspect but prepared to eat anything Alec dropped. It turned out the shop lady had been bitten by a dog when she was little (she showed Alec the scar on her leg) and had been terrified of them ever since. Alec told her Max was pretty terrified of dogs too. She gave Max her second sandwich. Once he'd finished it he vomited it back and then ate it again. Neither Alec nor the shop lady felt much like eating after that.

The three of them walked back up the main street together. The lady in the

antique shop rushed out as soon as she saw Max and gave him the basket and cushion.

“Is he alright? The poor love. I gave that woman a piece of my mind!”

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Normally Alec would be thinking – that would have left you dangerously short, wouldn't it? But this time he didn't, he thought about his mum instead.

All the way home via the supermarket to get some dog food. His mum had always wanted a dog but his dad had put his foot down. Something to do with worms and going blind. He bet she was going to love Max.

When he got home he'd ring Cindy. Say thanks. Say thanks but no thanks.

He'd say you can put back your dried flowers and scented candles round the bath, and I'll keep Max. He had no illusions about the fallout but you had to break things into manageable portions and then you just had to start somewhere.

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## **SALLY DENSHIRE**

### **after *Horses***

His brushes fume in turpentine,  
milk from the mainland sours,  
another day breaks around the tropic island shack.  
Fairweather lets go his brush.  
The kero-lit Masonite glows with equine outlines,  
teems with flesh tones and

shards of Oriental calligraph.

Stretching his arms skyward,

cicadas whirring in surround sound until

the childhood nightmare returns.

Mama heading for Papa's regiment in the Punjab,

abandons baby Ian to the moor.

Him at the whim of two aunts with whiskey breaths.

“And that Old Country stench of

burnt porridge and dank brick;

still it makes me queasy.”

I look again at the gallery wall on this air-con afternoon

where his outlines morph to a band of brumbies.

Mare and foal gaze through cicada haze,

inhaling each other's breath

in a slow mother-baby dance as the stallions graze.

The mob turns,

thunders under the island pines,

hooves patterning and compacting the dunes.

Note: Ian Fairweather's late, lesser-known painting *Horses* (c. 1960) is on loan to Murray Art Museum, Albury (MAMA) from Miss Drysdale's private collection.

Michel Dignand

## NEXT DOOR TO CHARLES

You've probably heard about Charles Blatchford, though I doubt you'll remember the details of the affair. He had his fifteen minutes of fame, or perhaps infamy would be a better word, eighteen years or so ago when Emily, his wife, was found mutilated and tied to the trunk of an apple tree in their garden.

Charles did his time without complaint, though he had quietly maintained that he was innocent.

I had to think for a while where I had heard his name before when he moved in next door, and when the penny dropped I was horrified. Frankly, I was petrified that I might be doomed to share the dreadful fate of his poor wife.

If I could have, I would have sold up and moved elsewhere. But as the local press had made such a fuss about Charlie being released after only sixteen years, with pictures of him in his garden next door, selling my place was going to be difficult. No-one willingly moves in next door to a murderer.

As you can imagine, I kept a close eye on him. Mostly from behind lace curtains, I admit. I didn't want to advertise the fact that I was terrified, or, even worse, nosey.

I'm not sure what I expected of him, but whatever it was I soon realised

I wasn't going to get it. Instead, I found he spent a lot of time in his garden, quietly digging or harvesting, often reading. He played a lot of music, mostly that classical stuff but sometimes ordinary pop. It was late spring when he moved in next door, so his windows were usually open, and the music flowed

gently out.

The smell of coffee, too, always around ten in the morning and again at three in the afternoon: the rich smell of real coffee, which I found delightful. In fact, I frequently found myself making coffee for myself, having been reminded of it by the aromas floating from his windows. Mind you, mine would be instant. I'd never get used to those machines they use these days.

So gradually I dropped my guard and stopped worrying so much about my safety. After all, I reasoned, just because he had chopped up his wife didn't mean he was going to do it again, and let's face it, I'm just his neighbour, not his wife.

Anyway, he must have been there at least a year before I finally met him, and when I did all those fears came flooding back.

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There's a little creek running down the valley behind our row. Each of the houses has its own little gate at the bottom of the garden opening out onto a narrow dirt footpath which more or less skirts the creek. Well, perhaps rivulet would be a better word. It's about a metre wide and perhaps thirty centimetres deep, trees growing on both sides making it quiet and shady the year round.

People jog there, or take their dogs for a walk. It's a nice natural spot in a built-up world. Every now and then along the course of the rivulet there is a garden seat, and sometimes, when it's not too hot, I take a book and sit there and read.

That's what I was doing when I met him.

Even though I'd been keeping an eye on him for so long, and despite his picture in the papers, I didn't recognise him up close. I was absorbed in my book, of course, and hadn't heard him approach. All of a sudden I realised that someone was standing quite close to me, and I sort of did a little jump and looked up. He was standing about three metres away, just looking at me. He

had a hat on, one of those floppy things that people wear these days, and his face was partly in shadow.

“Oh,” I said, flustered, “you made me jump.”

He smiled, his face all crinkly. “I’m sorry I surprised you,” he said softly. “It was just that you looked so ... relaxed, I suppose. I didn’t notice you there until you turned the page.”

And then I realised who he was, and my skin began to crawl. The hairs stood up on my arms, and I didn’t know what to say. I picked up my book and stood, holding on to the back of the seat for support, ready to run. But he was on the path between the seat and my garden gate, and I didn’t know what to do. I blushed, I know I did, and looked down, unable to look him in the face.

He must have realised immediately what was happening. “I’m so sorry,” he apologised. “I hadn’t meant to disturb you.” He looked down too, and turned away, and I saw that he was hurt by my reaction. He took a step away from me, facing back the way he must have come.

“No, wait,” I called to him before I realised what I was doing.

He stopped and turned, and looked at me expectantly. I could see the hope in his eyes.

“I was just surprised, that’s all,” I stammered.

“Well, I didn’t mean to surprise you.” His voice was so quiet that I could hardly hear him. “I’d better get on.”

There was something so ... well, sort of hangdog about him, if you know what I mean. As though I had kicked him when he was down. Suddenly all

my fears of him disappeared. I wanted to pat him, to soothe him. I'm not like that, usually. I've lived most of my life alone, and I don't react to people well. I did to him, though.

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"Please, don't." I didn't know what else to say. The seat was between us, and I felt awkward.

He obviously did, too. "You know who I am, don't you?"

I nodded. "My neighbour," I said. "I've seen you around."

"But you know who I am, don't you?"

I lowered my eyes. "Yes," I admitted.

"And that's why you were scared."

I wanted to deny it, but I could see he knew. "Yes," I nodded. "A bit. It was so ... so sudden."

He sighed. "I shouldn't have stopped like that. It was rude."

I couldn't help smiling. "Well, perhaps not rude. Maybe it was just that I had thought I was all alone, and suddenly you were there."

"And that I am who I am, too."

I nodded. "But I'm over that now," I said, and smiled at him, not quite a natural smile because I wanted him to be sure that I was okay about him being who he was.

Rather clumsily I sat down again, my back to him now. I turned and my head and said, "Well, now that we've met, why don't you sit down for a moment and tell me about yourself?"

He hesitated. "Are you sure?"

I nodded and patted the seat as though inviting him nearer. “Yes. I’m sure.”

I could see he was uncomfortable about it, but he clearly didn’t know what else he could do. He came around the seat and slowly sat, keeping some distance between us.

“I know you make delicious coffee,” I said. “I smell it every day. And you like music, too. I hear it, even in the house.”

“I’m sorry,” he apologised. “Is it too loud?”

“Not at all,” I told him. “I like it. And if I didn’t want to listen I could simply close the windows. Sometimes I’ve wanted to ask what it was that you were playing, but I never got up the courage.”

He chuckled. “Well, just call out to me if I’m in the garden. I won’t mind at all.”

“I’ll do that, now that we’ve met.”

And so we chatted about stuff for a quarter of an hour, and then I said goodbye and left him. As I went through my gate I turned and looked at him, and gave a little wave. He was smiling and relaxed, and he looked like a very nice man.

Needless to say, as soon as I got indoors I googled him and read many of the hundreds of reports about him. According to most of the reports he was a monster, an evil, dangerous man who deserved more than the twenty years

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of his sentence. All the photos of him on-line made him look the part. You wouldn’t want to meet him on a dark night. Or any other time either, I suppose.

But the man I had been speaking to seemed a gentle, mild-mannered man.



According to the reports he was just a few years older than me, and didn't look too bad for a seventy-one year old. He had been out of prison just over two years, with a four-year reduction for good behaviour. That meant something, I supposed.

Anyway, we met most days after that. I suspect that at first he was keeping an eye out for me, and when he saw me setting out for a walk, he would get to his gate at more or less the same time. Not that he would join me, not at first. No, he would just say g'day and maybe comment on the weather, and then go the opposite direction to me.

But slowly the greetings became warmer and the conversations longer, and before too long we would often walk together for a while, or sit on the seat chatting about this or that.

I enjoyed those times, and began to really look forward to our meetings.

After a few months of this, as the weather was turning cooler, I invited him in to my kitchen for a cup of tea. I daren't offer him coffee, because mine wouldn't have been a patch on his.

Then one day, as I was going to the Post office for something or another, Jennifer Bates stopped me. "I see you've taken up with that Charles Blatchford," she said bluntly, which took my breath away. "You want to be careful," she continued. "Didn't he chop his wife into pieces?"

I stared at her. There was a look of something like triumph on her face, and I could have slapped her, the silly cow. "Charles is my neighbour," I told her. "I haven't 'taken up' with anybody. And it would be none of your business if I had." I paused for effect, then leaned closer to her face. "Keep your bloody nose out," I spat, and I turned and stomped away, as angry as I have ever been.

Later that day, when I had calmed down, I went out my front door and into the next garden and knocked on his door. He was a bit surprised when he saw me there. "Can I come in?" I asked.

He opened the door wide and ushered me in, along a long dark corridor to his kitchen at the back of his house, a big room with a long window looking out onto his back garden. "Well," he said, looking me up and down. "This is unusual, isn't it? What can I get you?" He paused and looked more closely at me. "You've been upset, haven't you? What's the matter?"

"Some of your delicious-smelling coffee might be good," I said. "Could I try a cup of that?"

"Of course," he said. "Funny, really, that you've never been in here before."

He busied himself with a shiny coffee machine, all chrome and knobs

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and dials, and got some biscuits from a tin and put them on a plate while the machine did its thing. Then he got a jug and half-filled it with milk. "White?" he asked. Then, when I had nodded he stuck the jug under a pipe and turned a knob which started steam bubbling through the milk, making enough noise to silence us.

"Well," I said, "that was a performance, wasn't it?"

He chuckled. "Oh, it's all part of the theatre of properly made coffee. Now, tell me what the problem is."

So I did. "That Jennifer Bates," I told him. "She's a piece of work, she is."

"Which one is that?"

“The blonde with the pony tail and dark roots. Works in the baker’s. Got her nose in everything. Warned me about ‘taking up’ with a murderer.”

Charles laughed, a deep hearty laugh that filled the kitchen. “She’s right,” he said as his laughter subsided. “Oh, I don’t want to alarm you,” he said, putting his hand on my arm. “But you know, she’s right. I did kill Emily.”

I was taken aback. I don’t know what I thought he would say, but it certainly wasn’t that. “But you always denied it,” I said.

He looked down and smiled self-deprecatingly. “Well, you do, don’t you” he said quietly. “I mean, it’s sort of expected, isn’t it. And the papers exaggerated it all, as usual.”

I recoiled a little, and I expect the horror was showing on my face. “But I believed it,” I told him. “All these months I’ve believed you were innocent.”

He looked into my eyes for a moment. “Look, that’s what I said at the trial, but I’ve never said it to you, have I?”

“We haven’t talked about it.”

“No, we haven’t, have we. Do you want to, now?”

I hesitated. “I’m not sure,” I said. But we had had such a good time together ... did I want to lose that? “Maybe we should. But ...”

“I know,” he said. “Or at least, I can imagine. I expect you’ve been hoping that I was innocent, so that you wouldn’t have to be afraid of me. Is that it?”

I thought about it. “Yes,” I agreed slowly. “Yes, I think that’s it.”

“I don’t want you to be afraid of me either. Shall I tell you how it came

about?”

I nodded, but I was very doubtful. What if...

“Okay,” he started. “So yes, I killed Emily. I didn’t mean to, but she was driving me mad and I couldn’t stand it. She had lovers, lots of them, and the thought of losing her ... Look, I went temporarily mad and I killed her. It was wrong, it was evil. I didn’t mutilate her and tie her to a tree like the press said, I killed her with one blow. I meant to just frighten her, but I went too far.”

My hand was over my mouth and my eyes brimmed with tears.

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“I immediately came to my senses and went to the police, and I was arrested and charged and eventually pleaded not guilty because my barrister

said I should, and I kept that up until they found me guilty. I was taken away and I served my time for a dreadful crime, and I was released at the end of it.”

“But we’ve become friends,” I said and I could hardly get the words out.

He nodded. “But look,” he said, “I could never guarantee that I won’t kill you too.”

I turned away. “Oh no!” I cried.

He put his hand on mine. “We’ve got to face it,” he said. “I’m certain I would never lift a finger to hurt you, or anyone else. But we both know I’ve done it before. So what would a guarantee be worth?”

40

**TUG DUMBLY**

# Incredible

## Want your miracles

fat, loud & obvious

like a cheeseburger chain?

Knock yourself out.

Only beware the Epiphany,

Thunderclap, Revelation.

Those drive-through wonders drip

with the MSG

of Blockbuster Redemption,

are all too cheep'n'greezy,

prone to leave you poleaxed

with reflux

and mega-meal regret.

Most wonders worth their salt

are incremental,

catchable only on time lapse

like barnacles

blooming on a dock;

are thin elver slips

or splinters of a true cross

that never existed;

or a breeze

goose-pimpling a pond

or pick your own image.

Like a flower.

But best keep it small,

verging on invisible.

Miracles are shy. Need to be

coaxed right. No sudden

movements. Let them come to you,

sniff your hand, give it a lick ...

see there? she likes you!

41

**CLAIRE FEILD**

## **Palpable**

When her rusty-looking hands touch the  
rose, the two colors clash, her  
eyes stinging like maimed hurt.

As she scratches an itch against tree bark,  
the itch goes away, but not the  
itches in her brain created from  
brimming thoughts.

After she opens a blister on her forefinger  
with a pin, the liquid increases in  
strength, ruining her skirt, and  
teasing the room she is present  
in with its foul odor.

She wants to marry, the ultimate touch,  
but no man looks at a stalk of  
an arm, a scarecrow for a body.

42

**ADAM FIELED**

## **Nights I Staggered Drunkenly**

Nights I staggered drunkenly, down  
the winding, white-walled corridor which  
led to two major entrances (the ware-  
house space & the highwire itself); how  
it was that our version of freedom, stitched  
to good old-fashioned luck, had been  
allowed to recreate Philadelphia from its  
insides out, I could never figure out; as  
the videos projected onto screens fixed  
the right images into our heads (alienation  
of individuals in dim, exotic foreign films),  
a Temple punk at a microphone squealed,  
someone hit a keyboard, Mike reeled,  
drunker than me, the voice, video pealed—

43

### **DAVID GILBEY**

#### ***‘To Speak of the Woe ...’***

The suffering of women is largely ignored  
in the Islamic Art Museum’s diasporic collection:



soaring minarets and huddling domes attest the omnipotence of

Him – body and spirit – but She is absent or cloistered.

Sure, there are inlaid wedding chairs, mosques dedicated to favourite spouses  
(more palpable angels) and even a cerulean tear-catcher

for a sultan to measure the devotion of his wives

when he returns from business or war.

And jewellery, ceramics, weaving – celebrate women

as receptacles, handmaidens, supplicants ...

while men maintain the world.

Remarkable then, to see some Mughal miniatures which

against the traditions of male imagining –

religion, legend and regality –

depict *ragamala* – garlands of scenes inside the *zenana*

and domestic interiors – as here: *The Dying Maiden*

its bourgeois interior rich with brocade (and suggestion).

As she dies, shining, in a white dress, eyes still bright, bosom (with raised  
nipples) –

carefully delineated domes within the pink minaret –

her mother and sister (presumably) grieve while her father and brother –

the former's finger delicately poised at his mouth –

confer, it seems, about the impact on the household.

On a black street in front, a supine, bearded figure – her betrothed? –

bound, in fact or symbolically, for the looming black exit arch to the right ...  
the message is clear: men must rule and die while women  
even in death  
must please the gods and their artists  
*en deshabillé* .

44

Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois

## STINKY CHEESE

1.

The goat cheese lady unfriended me because I wouldn't pray to wind turbines or to Jesus or to goats. According to G.K. Chesterton, poets have been mysteriously silent on the subject of cheese, but I'm inching ever closer—I'm being vocal about the cheese lady. The cheese lady is thin as a rail, devoid of breasts. Her goats have breasts. She makes her husband milk them.

They get down behind the barn and pray to wind turbines and Jesus and the Goat God.

2.

The goat cheese lady has overmedicated, glassy blue eyes. They are a perfect match for the faded denim shirt that hangs on her bony shoulders.

There's too much in her face for me to wake up to. Those eyes are the windows to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. She had to raise her own parents.

She had to suckle them at her breast. It was too much for her. She was too much for me. I had to put on a life jacket and jump from the second floor window, into the flood. I floated by a rowboat and pointed with my thumb to where she waited for rescue.

3.

After the hurricane, I boarded a 747. The overhead compartments stank of French cheese. My carry-on contained an 800-page biography of J. Robert Oppenheimer and a worn copy of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, three months' worth of high quality vitamins, two pairs of underwear and a t-shirt with a frayed neckline and a flowery surfer design across the front. The guards at the airport detained me and asked me questions for which I had no answers. They wanted to know why the overhead compartments stank of French cheese.

How would I know? I hadn't even been on board yet. In the end I think they satisfied themselves that I was merely eccentric and stupid, just an average non-terrorizing American with thinning hair.

45

4.

On the plane I'd met a woman about my age, which is indeterminate. She was waiting for me on the sidewalk when I was released. I was pleased because I was always looking for someone to take care of me. She was pleased because she was always looking for someone to take care of, as her Polish grandmother had done for a succession of small rotund men who adored opera and had weak hearts.

Coincidentally, I also fit that description, though I suffer from other ailments as well.

This jet-lagged woman's eyes were unnaturally blue. They reminded me of the eyes of the goat cheese lady. I'd started seeing the goat cheese lady everywhere. I wasn't sure she'd made it out of the flood, so I felt guilty. I gorged myself on beignets out of guilt.

She took my suitcase and began rolling it toward the parking lot, in which chickens did a dance to keep away weasels. As she opened the door of her Peugeot, I knew her as an unrecognized saint. She stopped in her tracks, trying to figure out what to do about the annoying stigmata that had appeared on her hands and feet. Like Joni Mitchell, she smoked four packs of cigarettes a day, and decided to use them as gauze to wipe the blood away. In her car she smoked. The smoke smelled like a slaughterhouse. I had worked in a kosher slaughterhouse in Iowa, USA, and the smell brought back fond memories.

5.

We obtained a free apartment in Paris, courtesy of an Englishman who was also racked with guilt, but who did not drown it with beignets. The apartment building had been a carriage stop in the eighteenth century. Horses entered under the arch and stomped their feet on the cobblestones, released thousands of pounds of horse manure and methane gas, a precursor to the forces that would later create global warming.

Our apartment looks out on the rail yard. Trains enter and leave all day and night. They cause the earth to rumble. They shake the building. My wife (I forgot to say I married her) is unable to distinguish between external stimuli and internal stimuli, a symptom of her mental illness untouched by the many psychoactive drugs she takes. She is unable to sleep or concentrate or think.

This is, however, not terribly unusual. She watches a lot of TV, in this case French TV. She begs me to take her away from this wretched place, but the apartment is free and we have it for an unlimited time. Actually the owner doesn't even know we are here. She is renovating a houseboat in Germany (or

actually, having it renovated by a troupe of lesbians, former barmaids who have started a construction corporation) and is not expected back any time during this century. (Actually, only some of them are lesbian. Some are bisexual, and 46

some are transsexual, but it doesn't matter—they all have excellent carpentry skills.)

So I insist: “This is where we are and this is where we'll be” , as if I am spouting Hallmark Buddhism. My wife builds a rough crucifix in the middle of the living room and, with the assistance of some local meth heads, ties herself to it. “This is so derivative” , I say . “ There is nothing more derivative than parodies or tributes to Christianity. I am taking you back to the asylum”.

“Fine”, she says . “ Anywhere is better than being here with you”.

47

**JONATHAN GREENHAUSE**

# **I am a God**

stripped of its divinity, subsequently forced  
to scrub toilets  
& change light fixtures.

I regret nothing but miss the ability  
to fling lightning bolts at unsuspecting bystanders,  
to make messiahs  
out of ordinary folk.

I prove my inexistence by rarely showing up,  
by taking a vacation after my attempts at genesis,  
as I am a god  
but appear to be human,  
a man mass-produced in my own fragile image,  
lucky to have survived the saber-rattling  
between the US  
& the Soviet Union.

I'm also an opportunist, quick to convert  
to a brand of atheism allowing for the possibility  
that God is dead,  
though I know I'm

currently employed at Kentucky Fried Chicken  
& am a warning away from getting canned.

48

**RORY HARRIS**

## road

& when the road opens up that old familiar rhythm

details & pasture around us

fenced, tied, bowed & in drought

against the rubber of bitumen

we scramble into our own bodies rattling in dust

& empty bottles nudge for space

on the too small table

a tap of security against pockets

bulging with tickets

your wallet was left on the bar hours ago

street sweepers line up

taxis for the urban life

here are the wide boulevards in sunlight

all merry in the mild afternoon

as a long marriage floats around us

the straightening of steel rods

after the storms of earthquake

to repair & replace the broken bodies of our lives

& then we walk through straight streets & lanes



the sleeper over concrete

a red apple on a pile of papers on a blue crate

a grid of business, a rustle of papers, coffee shots & commerce

the walker in merino wool

a rumble of trams, arteries at right angles to the day

the street struts, bends & bloodied & pierces the heart

49

my mother was born in a town like this

the cold damp mist in the O so quiet dawn

a car mumbles on uneven surfaces

& the steep curves of the bluestone footpaths flooding a life time ago

weatherboards hold up imagination & the highway bowties

a black cat in a second hand bookshop

rubs itself against a stack of dusty fiction

ruled straight the road back to this familiar dirt

& half way down your shopping list bookmark

in a Cormac McCarthy novel before things get really mad

you've reminded yourself to vote

50

**ELANNA HERBERT**

***Road to Gallipoli: between Cappadocia and Pamukkale***

I remember 1977

the day after Pamukkale or the

day before forty degrees in the shade me and Heather climbed down a gully

beside the road to a shallow river a big creek with

rocks

I got totally wet in that river

laying down

in creek water shallow in my

brown cotton cross-over straps sun dress cheap leather sandals I haggled well  
back in Greece I immersed my body fully water flowed over my head my torso

my between my legs I wanted to take that heat off undress my top layer of

skin peel peel it back reveal fresh flesh all I wanted to do was to just cool down I  
wanted to think about you

walking up

the side of the steep bank dust

dry rocks treacherous inclination careful not to slip climbing up that gully  
coming back to you dripping wetness over you sitting in the dust three Kiwi

mining mates strung out in Turkey with heat and hangovers smoking sitting

beside the road sitting waiting looking hot being hot complaining about how

hot Turkey turned out to be after the disappointment of Greece

you looked up at me

standing wet

beside the road you said I looked like a wild  
Gypsy like one of the women we had seen the day before near Pamukkale  
probably Bedouin walking camels and kids your blue blue eyes watched my  
wet cotton dress cling tight against my body I held your gaze the broken down  
bus was fixed I climbed on board sat beside you next to the window watched  
the gully beside the shallow river fall away the distance beyond you retreat I sat  
wet through.

I felt cool refreshed.

Then we drove to Gallipoli.

51

**MATT HETHERINGTON**

*Seidel's*

sidled up, said some fink

-ish thing re. rich bitches

including him

-self, made out

like he's lying in the shade with his self's other

otherness in a burn

-ished mirror, blown

all over the place in

-cluding is

-rael, wiped up the mess with

us, dropped

us in the re

-cycling re

-ceptacle, and just ad

-justed his itchy spectacles

ha we've gone

off home in a rage

where the living is cheesy inside a ho

-use with no shame

not suicidal but mad going you can

not be serious you'll never get

away with this you will

even though sometimes oddly neglecting to mention some

-thing irritatingly ex

-cluding of the poor bourgeoisie who even sometimes get

the joke's on us

52

**ROSS JACKSON**

# **Waking something**

## **bedroom humidity**

in the way rum seeps through cake  
brain muddied  
by whatever the clock at the head of  
the stairs says  
what kind of traffic makes you peer out  
for last night's storm's leftovers  
breeze making gold shivers  
in pooled rain  
swarming clouds still crowd  
window glass  
after too long staring at street light haze  
core burnt out  
whatever the clock at the head of  
the stairs says  
whatever the clock, whatever the clock

53

**JILL JONES**

# Undoing

The street is full of the night

The night obliterates the street

Or they become one

Almost the same

Or they part

Like fingers or, no

Like parts of a song

The night can't write or sing

The street doesn't play

It's real

The street has concrete and money

Cars full of political clout

The night uses up electricity

Uses up feelings, sight and glass

Where are the people

In the cars, in the glass

The political clout moves

Behind closed doors

Night and day

Two lovers approach the night

Or the street

54

This has always happened

Her face half lit

Her face half-shadowed

They smell of the usual fevers or demands

They smell like strangers

Of night wood, and forgotten wells

They part the night or fingers

They are always undoing

Returning to an older politics

The lustrous

55

**CHRISTOPHER (KIT) KELEN**

## **practice of a disappearance**

among these words my friends have thrown

I scratch a muddy paw

to overtake the sun

hide clouds

and peekaboo

loose weave of mind

jazz is such a vanishing

fall through

I hear the scratching at the wall

the cat keeps coming in

annoying and it wishes fed

if it were Schrödinger's maybe it wouldn't

maybe it would

if your words are mine

then where is it that I have gone?

if I said where

would you be there?

come and gone

so I set out



through an open door

name of the absence is yesterday

56

and now

the afternoon doesn't end

it's still going

with stars downstream the sky has strewn

every word has its shadow to lift

every breath is a secret

day is ash

last night's lost dreams are set to burn

57

Maryanne Khan

## SIDEWAYS

**I** was quite partial to oysters," the old lady said, eyes narrowing as she peered into the tunnel that occasionally turned itself inside out into the present even as the actual present was swallowed whole.

Her mind tumbled to unexpected locations, some of which she thought

she had forgotten, as indeed she had. For a period, they had lost relevance and therefore a place in her present, amongst the daily traffic of shopping, keeping house, washing and feeding herself, until these activities became unnecessary –

now performed by the nurses.

These days, she wandered an unfamiliar landscape populated by figures

both living and dead who presented in startling combinations. She now stared at the youngish woman on a metal chair beside her bed. It could have been anyone, and probably was.

“But we were speaking of oysters,” Auntie continued. “I had the proper little forks, silver tines, bone handles, so pretty,” she said, testing. “They’re in the top drawer of the dresser, as you might remember, along with the little glass dishes for the condiments. Lemon and pepper only, oysters are best natural.”

“I remember, Auntie.”

The old woman wanted to ask her outright, which child of whose child she was, but this would have given away more than she was willing to surrender.

She said, “I must tell that dreadful nurse person to get me a dozen.”

The visitor said, “No, I’ll get them. It’ll be a pleasure.”

Ah, Clarissa thought, unlike that creature Wilson, this girl is eager to oblige a whim.

She searched the eyes of her visitor, mapping the face to establish a connection along the bloodlines of family. It had to be a family member, for no-one else came, just those wretched long-faced ewes who only now felt a

certain obligation to subject themselves to the torture of this bare room, to natter about this and that, stare at what remained of her, and having done

sufficient penance and proffering good wishes and a threadbare excuse, to slink away from the stench of disinfectant, the sullen linoleum and the inevitability of her encroaching demise. It gave her great satisfaction to put these self-sacrificing women to this small task or that, be it straightening pillows, fetching a magazine she would never read, a piece of fruit she would never eat.

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These she used to bribe the one nurse she did like, Sister Jane, to sometimes sit

with her when a curious sense of desolation seized her and the legs of the metallic furniture seemed to stab the gloom like so many stiff reeds in a frozen linoleum pond.

This visitor, she observed, had greenish eyes that looked directly into her own, unlike many others who chased butterflies.

“Stand up straight and look people in the eye,” Papa had always said. “Let people know who you are and that you’re as good as any of ‘em.”

When he had died, two of his children had gradually softened into a state of puffy, mothlike dissolution at the hands of a mother who, overnight, had turned into a pale, quivering rabbit with pink eyes. The youngest, Maisie, had decided that she was incapable of any action whatsoever, a decision she stood by even after she was married and until the babies came and she was forced to some degree, to perform, whilst still maintaining that charming, doll-like dependency on her husband. Their brother, Arthur, whom they called Bunny, eventually took up drink and pedophilia. Clarissa and the eldest, Charlie, fended manfully for themselves.

Clarissa drifted back, feeling that this was hardly a familiar face, yet one that provoked a visceral tug between them—affection? She sat easy on the stiff chair, leaning slightly forward, her face gentle, but bright.

“Intelligence I can distinguish,” Clarissa thought with satisfaction, “it’s in the eyes.”

Clarissa continued, her speech slightly hampered by a drooping lower lip.

“Not what you would call a nice person, that Wilson. Devious. And of course, they won’t have decent oyster forks in here,” she said, peevish. “They have the effrontery to give you plastic cups!”

No, Wilson had the hands of a farm labourer albeit uncalloused. Capable

hands, large enough to span an octave or to handle tools. There was nothing refined about her and nothing spiritual. She was the peasant standing outside the frame of Millet's picture of rustic piety, head erect, picking her nose. Yet she went about her duties with a perverse sense of religiosity, regarding her work as a set of sacred rituals to be performed identically each day. Sister Wilson's feet trod a grid along which she motored, stolid and unflurried as a tramcar.

However, that other one, Sister Wood, despite the name, was made of stuff less stern.

"But they are looking after you, no?" the visitor said. "Mother chose this ..." and here she stumbled for an appropriate term, "... here, I mean, because of its reputation."

Clarissa now remembered a soothing ambassadorial voice assuring her that 'the family' thought it best. "Not having to worry about every little thing, you 59 know," the emissary had bleated. "Time someone looked after you."

As none of the so-called family felt that this duty actually fell to them, this was the solution.

The patient clenched down on her memory, forcing it to surrender a name.

Marie, that was it, the elder daughter of Sylvia, the one who had conspired to remove her from all that was precious to this ignominy for no reason whatsoever.

She did not remember having stumbled across the parish wearing her

best patent leather shoes in the rain, to arrive, pounding on the door of the presbytery, demanding Confession to the late Father Donnelly, to absolve her of her husband's murder.

Having identified her visitor, Clarissa dozed.

Marie saw that the top sheet, hospital-starched and folded over the flat

chest, made of her aunt a mere wrinkle in the narrow bed.

After a few moments of slumber, Clarissa said, “It was the ‘flu I had, wasn’t it?” Marie knew this was not a question but a mental game of Scrabble that the old lady played, lining up the tiles that spelled S-T-R-O-K-E, laying these down and proclaiming, “FLU!” She also knew that the old woman never had the tiles to spell DEMENTIA and no one dared deal them to her.

“But you’re much better now,” Marie said. “Sister said much.”

And so she would say, Clarissa thought, as long as the bills were paid and the patient could be abandoned to solitude with impunity.

“As I mentioned,” Clarissa said, “that woman Wilson is not to be trusted.

I know for a fact that it was she who took my pearls.” She held up fingers glittering with jeweled rings. “If she wants to steal these, she will have to cut them off me in my sleep!”

Marie laughed. “Oh, no one would take your rings, Auntie. I expect you’ll find your pearls eventually. Pray to St. Anthony.”

“Ridiculous. Things don’t just walk of their own accord. Oh no, I have my eye on that one!”

She closed her eyes, and there was an oblong velvet box, but when she had opened the drawer, there had been only her undergarments. In retaliation, she had tumbled its contents onto the floor.

Marie observed as her aunt dropped off again, that Great Aunt Clarissa retained something authoritative—perhaps in the sharp, aristocratic profile so unlike that of any other family member—or perhaps in the way she asserted her lingering presence.

Aunt Clarissa, she reflected, had never been the beauty. It was her pretty,

plump sister who had stolen an Englishman's heart. He had grown up in Constantinople, surrounded by ponies in silken trappings, son of a trader, a 60 child who had smoked a hookah from the age of twelve to then run away to sea at fourteen, and thence from London to sign up for the Army—twice, under different names—who had been shell-shocked, finally emigrating to Australia to marry the charming, helpless Maisie. He had subsequently lain down his life to her in gentle, dedicated service.

On the other hand, Clarissa's Jim was a figure prone amongst pillows, floating above a dark, creepy place under his bed where they hid gifts for Marie and her siblings when they were children. Marie remembered crawling under the bed. There, in the dark, she had discerned the startling pink shape of a stillborn baby doll lying on its back. It was too big to fit under there sitting up and it was ghastly. Chubby and bald, it had a rigid plastic body and clenched fists, so unlike the latest baby dolls with soft, pliant bodies needful of cuddles.

"Auntie means well," Mother had said. "She doesn't know about toys."

It was a way of excusing her, not for the poor choice, but for the fact that she had had no children, a condition that womenfolk regarded if not with the status of a disease, then as a casualty, saying, "Jim, the War, you know."

Yet for decades Clarissa had ministered to her ailing husband, ordering the doctor about during his visits, "In Full Control" the women liked to say behind her back. "No need to worry about Clarissa," they said, "she rules with an iron rod."

\*

Marie remembered that it had once also been the authority of the perfect coat and hat, the proper forks for oysters, glass dishes for pickles or relish, never, never a jar on the table, and never artificial flowers. Authority was a tray set out for Father Donnelly with a crystal decanter of Scotch, a slim water carafe, ice in

a silver bucket and little tongs. She knew these things because it had been her, who upon being asked to fetch Father his customary afternoon drink, had been caught red-handed in the kitchen slopping Scotch into a crystal whiskey glass.

“Good GOD girl!” Aunt Clarissa had scolded her then fourteen year-old self, “One always allows a gentleman to serve himself!”

Now over thirty and mistress of etiquette, Marie remembered her

humiliation. Yet this had been the catalyst that later lead to profuse

compliments after a dinner in their Brussels home. “Better than Le Cirque,” the American CEO of her husband’s multinational had said after her triumphant

pheasant and the truffle soup. The guests had left, gushing praise for the food and conversation, yet her husband had found fault. The usual, her having

‘domineered’ the evening, speaking of books and art, shifting the topic away from Business.

61

She had sensed something in the CEO, something needy, and had plucked out of her library an inspirational little book, about someone loving someone ...

*To Death*, a book that she had found comforting, hoping it would do the same for him.

Two weeks later, the CEO had committed suicide and she knew he hadn’t read the book.

\*

She leaned forward to adjust the blanket over the patient and felt the distinctive give under her left hand of a rubber mattress-protector. She removed her hand quickly.

The old lady poured herself suddenly into the present, “Is that you, dear?”

The visitor wasn't sure as to which "dear" she might be perceived. Clarissa had not indicated that she remembered her.

"It's Marie. I'm visiting from Europe."

"Of course you are," the old lady said impatiently. "I know. You're the Contessa. Married some Hungarian."

"Italian," Marie said.

"Most unsavoury," Clarissa muttered, crepey eyelids closing. "Those foreign types can be so unpredictable. At least there is the title."

Marie couldn't find it in her heart to tell her that the title was a nickname given by her English grandfather, and one she very much enjoyed.

Far from a Contessa, she thought, and abruptly drew back from proceeding down that perilous path.

"You would think one would be given some credit," Clarissa said, now fully awake. "But no. Every effort is to no avail."

Marie had noticed a pair of engraved gold compacts, the silver cylinder on the raw metal table. Even in the gloom, it was obvious that the lined face had been powdered, the hollow cheeks buffed with rouge, the lips anointed with plum-coloured lip salve, as Clarissa called it.

Yet, by all accounts, the ebbing mind was slipping back across a shifting fluid boundary between what was, what is, and what there is to be. Marie

imagined her in a constant state of reinvention, of becoming, the rocky facts of life submerged in indeterminate pools of time. Aunt Clarissa swam, Marie



imagined, fish-like in the timeless internal sea that was her mind. The swimmer resurfaced, coming up for air.

“The other day,” she confided in a low voice, “I heard Jackson under the bed.”

“He must have got out,” Marie said with kindness, remembering cream paint on walls, the beautiful furniture. That paint, the substantiality of it, 62 the soft gloss that had aroused in her a sense of something this woman had somehow handed on to her.

There was no denying that Clarissa had always been uncomfortable around children. There was no room for children in the flat and they were told to behave, her sister and brother in particular. Marie remembered herself as a serious child, the eldest, whom she suspected her siblings did not much like.

“Poor Jackson!” Clarissa said. “They don’t bother to lock him up, a disgrace! I asked Father Donnelly to oblige when he came by, dear man that he is.”

Marie knew that Father Donnelly had scandalously made off with some prized antiques from Clarissa’s flat, claiming they were gifts from the widow.

He had died years ago.

“If you see him, can you put him back in his cage?” Clarissa said, flustered by imagined flashes of blue and green feathers under the bed or on top of the tall grey steel cabinet in which a best mohair coat hung, attracting moths and silverfish.

Marie thought that perhaps the ghost of the invalid husband and his dead

budgerigar also dwelled in there, emerging now and then in brief nocturnal

flights. It was entirely possible in the shimmering half-light of moonstones that sifted through the parchment blind the nurses kept eternally rolled down. That

‘busy old fool, unruly sun’ had no place in here.

She remembered Aunt Clarissa leaning over her in the car, snatching a newspaper and spreading it peevishly over her skinny childish knees, berating her brother, Marie’s Uncle Charlie, who had insisted on driving them to the Blue Mountains and it was hot, so hot, and the sun beat relentless on the legs of Auntie’s charge, and why, in God’s name had he insisted on coming at this godforsaken midday hour when it was far too warm? Charles, deaf, had bellowed at his sister, “Good God woman! A bit of sun never did any harm!” Marie’s mother had said, “Just imagine! For your thirteenth birthday, Auntie Clarrie is taking you to Sydney!”

This had been another Auntie Clarrie, one no longer chained to the bedside of the man who had returned, partly living, from the War. He had crossed over to the legitimate world of the War dead, taking at last his appointed place at the cenotaph.

Marie had, however, wondered why she had been the chosen one, the travel-companion.

They boarded in Melbourne, changing trains at Albury, an inconvenient switch between twin Spirits of Progress so that first Castor, then Pollux shuttled them onwards, steadily through the night. She had now forgotten a once-precious memory of whatever they had eaten in the glamorous Dining Car

(surely, she had later bragged about it to her brother and sister?) then returning  
63

to their sleeping-carriage, giggling at one another’s lurching. She remembered being borne towards the unexpectedly attainable object of her childish imagination—Sydney!

Oh! what a voyage it had been, requiring a Brownie camera, new clothes, shoes, sponge bag and small suitcase of her own. It had been the first of many voyages she was later to take without a thought.

She came back to the present. The nurses choose to keep the blinds down.

How curious. Perhaps not—penumbra reveals less, robs mirrors of power, blurs distance.

Even as she thought of nurses, Sister Wilson appeared, her face appointed with the fixed cheerful expression she wore for the doomed. She knocked briefly and advanced, unbidden.

Aware of her, Clarissa snapped, “I didn’t call for you. Go away.”

The nurse shook her head and laughed, the apologetic, prim laugh produced when a naughty child says something outrageous in company.

“You might not have, but it’s medication time and we want to get better, don’t we?”

“I won’t have it,” the old lady said. “Don’t bother.”

The nurse propelled herself in softly-spoken shoes across the floor. “Now, now,” she said to the naughty child.

She held out a paper cup, arranged her face less unpleasantly. Her contrived smile crashed against the will of the old child in the bed, and shattered when the patient said, “Take it away!”

“I’ll do it,” Marie said.

The nurse shot Marie a petulant glance as if to say, you mightn’t mind

doing this part of my job, but I don’t see you round here with a bed pan, so that Marie lowered her eyes.

“You know you must take them,” the nurse said, rattling the pills in the cup.

“Nothing of the sort,” Clarissa snapped. “Your say-so amounts to nothing.

Besides, I can’t swallow.” She paused, “More to the point,” she said, “When my niece leaves I wish to use the bed-pan.”

The nurse snapped, “You used it earlier, during morning rounds.”

“Regardless,” Clarissa said, “I need to move my bowels.”

“Well in that case,” the nurse said, “in that case, we can’t have any more nasty accidents, can we. Far too many of those of late. I am busy enough as it is without having to cope with yet another sponge-bath, changing linen ...”

She paused to allow the humiliating information to register with Marie, who pretended not to have heard.

Nurse continued, “All the more reason for you to take your pills and not make a fuss.” Placing the cup of tablets on the table, she shoved it forward. “I 64 do have other patients, as well you know.”

Clarissa turned her face away.

Marie, thinking wildly of tonsillectomies and the process of swallowing, said, “Perhaps with a little ice cream? Sister won’t mind getting you some.”

“That would be nice,” Clarissa said.

The nurse bristled, and veering perilously away from her professional training, briefly considered appropriating the idea as her own.

With a studied glance at the watch pinned to her uniform, she said, “I’ll see if they have any, although I highly doubt it. We don’t have luxuries laid on to pander to any individual patient.”

“Still, you’ll see?” Marie said.

“Seems I have little option,” the nurse muttered.

“So kind of you,” Marie said sweetly.

“Simply doing my duty,” Nurse said, wearing a tight little mouth, as though sucking on a lemon.

Marie watched her scramble out of the swamp of muddied protocol onto drier land and into the corridor, returning with a small cardboard tub and the tiny wooden paddle that Marie was surprised still accompanied it. Such details from the past resurfaced without warning, reminding her of what she was doing here—Madame Di Gregorio, Australienne, considering returning to the land of her memories that drew her more strongly than did its people.

The nurse jabbed a fingernail under the cardboard lid.

“Here,” she pronounced, stabbing in the wooden spoon that Marie knew her aunt would abhor. “Now I’ve taken the trouble, it needs be eaten,” Nurse said shoving a spoonful before the old face buried in the pillow.

Clarissa’s dark eyes flashed in mineral fury, “Sit me up, you fool.”

The nurse sucked the lemon harder, loosened the sheet, raised the patient’s shoulders, (how thin she is, Marie thought, even for her!) and plumped pillows with such vigour that Marie expected her to dust her hands together once it was accomplished.

“Are we comfortable?” nurse Wilson said, sour.

“I am seldom comfortable,” Clarissa said.

\*

And suddenly, there was Clarissa, in a wool coat of the finest fabric, hair tucked

under a smart felt cloche with a graceful feather plume, standing beside the mantel with its antique clock flanked by two exquisite ormolu urns.

“Turn around, child, and let me see. It won’t do if the seams aren’t straight.”

Marie had turned around in the frightful hand-me-down hot pink coat

65

someone’s mother had donated to hers, cringing at the knowledge that nothing, but nothing—not straight seams on her first pair of stockings, not the ‘mod’ heels on her new shoes—could possibly make up for the shabby, tasteless, hot pink

coat. It was unbearable, the knowledge that although the coat was warm enough, it was also true that her mother could not afford to buy her something new.

In the end, the seams had been straight, the gulf between good taste and the lack thereof generously ignored, and Auntie applied supple kid gloves like a smooth coat of paint, and so they went down to catch a tram.

Marie had long ago realized that the gene responsible for a discerning eye, that ability to distinguish between real and imitation, possessed by only one of two sisters, had skipped a generation—sideways, for Clarissa had no offspring—to be bequeathed to herself. Indeed, Marie could distinguish the finest piece in an antique shop at a single glance. The tragedy was, that, although this infallible skill applied to objects—paintings, houses, furniture—it utterly failed her when it came to her own kind.

\*

Marie looked up. Clarissa had submitted.

But ice cream was trickling from the mouth stricken by the recent stroke

to run down the chin, the neck, to puddle in the collar of her nightgown. The nurse scooped and jabbed the paddle into Clarissa’s labouring mouth, scooped

and jabbed, smiling a frozen smile.

“There!” she finally announced, “All done.”

Dumping the spoon into the empty container, she plonked the detritus on the table in a coagulating pool, then turned herself about and walked out.

Clarissa sat as she had been left, staring ahead in silence, fists clenched on the cotton coverlet. She continued to stare as the mess on her collar seeped into her skin.

Marie sat frozen. Neither of them spoke. One half of her mind was

considering reporting the nurse, the other half weighing up the consequences of doing so, extremely mindful of the fact that the retribution exacted by those accused, particularly of those justly accused, can be very harsh indeed.

Hospital sounds welled up in the slick corridors, a squeaky wheel on a gurney shrieked.

Suddenly claustrophobic, Marie thought of the marble apartment in Rome,

the silky parquet floors in Milan, the grand Maison de Maitre they now had in Brussels. Of herself staring through French doors looking over the vast gardens, at the disused stables with room for four horses at the far end, thinking, how can I give up all of this? Why can't I just let him have his lovers, endure his 66

temper? I can learn to cope.

“A flannel dear,” the Aunt finally said. “Please fetch one.”

Released from paralysis, Marie jumped up and hurried to the hand basin and squeezed warm water through the washcloth, returning with it neatly folded.

“Do you want me to ...?”

“For God’s sake, child,” the old woman snapped, “I’m not a cripple!”

Marie sat down and stared through the thick silence at the merciful blind.

Clarissa wiped.

Marie thought of that book in Brussels. It had been called *Dale Loves*

*Sophie to Death*, about the epiphany that otherwise meaningless graffiti had brought about in a man whose soul was dying. She had given it to another

dying man who had not read it. Perhaps there was no redemption for the truly self-condemned.

“Would you like a towel?” she offered.

“No, dear, but thank you all the same,” Clarissa said, “that little sponge

bath was quite refreshing. Did I mention that Father Donnelly was in the other day? He asked me to marry him, you know. Of course, I accepted.” She put out her hands, moving them gracefully so that the jewels in the rings shot dancing sparks onto the ceiling. “However” she said, “I do feel that a diamond would be somewhat excessive, wouldn’t you agree?”

Marie did not reply.

Something white hovered between them.

“Put this back before you go. You should go, dear. Father will be here any minute.”

Marie took the cloth to the basin.

“And you mustn’t forget my oysters if you come again.”

“Of course I will, and I won’t forget.” She might have been lying. What she

had come for had evaded her. It had been her need for some sense of belonging, something she no longer needed to run from, but rather, to. Perhaps it was too late, the link too broken. Perhaps she herself was too broken.



“Mind you rinse it now—thoroughly.”

“I will.”

Her face in the dull mirror above the basin shimmered in liquid reflection, sending her features back to her, the eyes shadowy, troubled, the mouth taut, because it had occurred to her, what if other, more insidious genes have also skipped a generation? She searched for a revelatory sign in the mirror.

She squeezed out the flannel that released a slow, cloudy streak into bright, clear water.

67

**ZOHAB KHAN**

# Untitled

## Theoretic

they heretic

dedicate death to Allah

na you can't

peace be priority

*assalamualaikum* brother sister

mister?

why you staring at me like I'm about to blow the place?

cos I've got that bearded brown face?

*gotta* keep running it's a critical race ... theory

now you see me

now you don't

now you want to know everywhere that I go

and if I don't tell you

you're going to take away my passport

citizenship

and kick me back to where I came from

where the drones drop inspiration for the next generation,

to find father figures in fake freedom fighters,

who used to fight for you,  
and now they're fighting you.

68

**DANIEL KING**

## King Henry X

Like a mirage, this writing of a King  
Dissolves under erasure's X to leave  
The unequal cross of butterfly wings –  
Or else the Exe, exalted to receive  
The 8th King Henry's signs and thus to weave  
Allusions to a mystic future realm –  
One bright as chrysolite but not perceived  
By eyes or via crude Morse code: what Anselm  
Could ever frame its proof? At Vlamingh's helm  
The Other Exmouth rose and overwhelmed  
The text; a pen ex calibre was found,  
The Vlamingh Head lighthouse, a Paschal candle  
To link both Exmouth skies, but its symbol  
Consigned all words to the written background –  
Or th' Authour selfe could not at least attend.  
Yet those thirteen Last Supper masts transcend  
Everything on the Range, the Cape's long spine  
As red as priestly copes, even its end,  
The Head itself, God-sculpted to re-sign

The 8th Henry's claims as Head, *plaisir*-shrined.

For Roland Barthes to the White Tower came

To write *Morte D'Author*, explorer-entwined

So home rule's peacock-coloured skies proclaim

The Word, and King and INRI X the same.

Note: Vlamingh Head Lighthouse, named after Willem de Vlamingh, an early explorer of Western Australia, is located at the tip of North West Cape, Western Australia. The 'other'

Exmouth is a town on the peninsula. '-.-' is Morse code for 'X'.

69

Daniel King

## THE ASTROLOGICAL COASTERS

1

As I wander around the lounge, I see that eight of the tables have coasters with astrological motifs. The coasters are of white cardboard, and each has twelve circles of a different colour. The missing coasters are those of Aries, Libra, Sagittarius, and Pisces. I pick up the coaster corresponding to Taurus. Its circles are dark brown. Beer stains obscure some of the writing, but most of it is clear: You are determined and methodical. You have completely mastered the

simple art of ... Others are trying to emulate your success. Stay one step ahead of them ...

I find myself wondering what 'stay one step ahead of them' is supposed to mean. Could it be a message?

A little troubled, I approach the door. The hotel has two lounges: I decide

to investigate the other one.

2

In the other lounge a fire has been lit, but no one is present. It's the off-season: late autumn. The floorboards squeak as I check each table for the Pisces coaster.

But there are no astrological coasters, let alone any that were missing from the original lounge.

Noticing that I have carried with me the coasters from this lounge, I

resume my examination of them. Uppermost, with pale blue circles, is the one corresponding to the Twins:

Gemini (May 22 – June 21). You are whimsical and impulsive. Who else

but you would ... You modestly call this a ... But your friends call it pure genius.

70

Yes; I am whimsical and impulsive, I reflect, even though I am not a Gemini. Does that matter? I stare out at the night, and at the dark rainy roses clawing the leaded panes of the French windows. And what does 'Who else but

you' mean? That I am alone in the hotel?

Absently I resume walking.

3

I'm lost. I draw myself up, look around. I still have the astrological coasters, but both the original lounge and the other lounge are nowhere to be seen. Could

I have been travelling in circles? All I can see are the doors of some kind of passage. Probably they lead to the guest rooms. But the doors have a malignant appearance, their numbers broken or wholly missing. Peeling lacquer.

Malignant ... *Cancer!* I flick through the coasters until I find the one

corresponding to this sign. Its red circles are like bleeding eyes, or moons.

The spirit world fascinates you. But you respect it. And ... your spirits ...

with nothing but ... Your friends ... thank their lucky stars.

So I have friends! The previous coaster, I seem to recall, had implied that

as well. Perhaps the coasters are logbooks of the heart, as it were, and are trying to tell me that even though the hotel is empty, others are looking out for me.

It strikes me suddenly that I should leave the hotel to see. But do I want

to do that? Beyond the hotel is the endless dark karri forest, and I could never feel safe there ...

But if I stay in the hotel I shall have to find food and drink, and

there might not be much left.

4

Leo (July 23 – August 23). People look to a forceful, dynamic person like

you for leadership. Do not disappoint them. Be the first to ... But be

careful. It could start another revolution.

The umber circles on the Leo coaster make me think of beer nuts. Somehow I

have found my way back to the original lounge again, and on each of the tables  
71

is a glass dish containing similar savouries, and also ingots of butter. These will keep me going, I reflect.

After taking from the fridge behind the bar a bottle of bitter lemon – the

black-and-white checked tiles on the floor remind me of a chessboard – I sit on one of the tables, concentrating on my predicament. I won't starve, at least for the moment: but surely I can't spend the rest of my life in the hotel? Who could

bear, after all, a life that consists in staying where one's purpose and role are unclear, and where the only kind of guidance seems to come from the stars?

A life dominated by crude oppositions, such as 'original' and 'other'?

'D.K ... '

I start. Someone called my name! Clearly I was wrong – I'm not alone in the hotel! Could it be one of my 'friends'? Curious as to where the words came from, I glance around. The lounge opens on to the verandah, but beyond that is the karri forest, and I could never go there.

Nevertheless, I pass over the lounge's beery carpet on to the bare wooden boards of the verandah.

5

The rain is like claws, and makes me flinch, but I manage to insulate myself from the cold. Then I crane to look over the railing. The drop is sheer. That means I am at the opposite end of the hotel from the carpark.

There seems to be no sign of the person who had spoken. . . . I certainly can't hear anyone now - although given the wind and the rain that is not surprising.

You are methodical, practical and cool. You keep cool by ... Keep doing this and we can safely predict a month of great harmony and tranquility.

Words once more – but from *within* the lounge!

Hastily I push myself past the door, close it.

Something familiar about the words makes me check the text on the next

72



coaster: that of Virgo.

I am right. Whoever had spoken to me had been reading the words from the coaster. The words clearly correspond to my actual situation: 'cool' can point to nothing else but the wintry conditions on the verandah. But if the coasters are actually determining my life, what are the implications, for my life, of the four lost ones? An inevitable gap in my being, if not my sanity?

6

7

Still weighing up exactly what the Authority – who in some way had seemed an impostor – had meant, I pack the last suitcase into the car. Whatever, he had been right: there is danger in the hotel. But if only he had been more specific about the nature of it! 'Danger of primordial, originary collapse' means nothing, after all. Still, it had been accommodating of him to lend me his car and suitcases.

Impulsively, I get into the car, put the key in the ignition. But I don't turn the key. Really, I don't want to leave the hotel until I find out exactly what's going on. I absently inspect myself in the mirror. But the shadow of a swaying gum tree – probably, I tell myself, home to Emperor Gum moth caterpillars – makes it difficult to resolve details.

On the seat beside me are the astrological coasters. Uppermost is Scorpio:

Scorpio (Oct.24 – Nov.22). Luxury is the name of your game.

You would never mix ... Your friends are grateful for this trait in your character.

The Authority is definitely telling me to leave, then. What else could his reference to my 'never mixing' mean?

Or has he changed his mind, and is trying to tell me that I can never mix  
with the outside world *because in some way I cannot understand there is no  
outside world?*

73

Wondering whether the Sagittarius coaster may contain an explanation of the  
message, I flick through the coasters. But the one corresponding to Sagittarius is  
not there. I try to remember if it was one of those that were originally missing.

But the detail eludes me. There seem to be gaps in my memory.

Hadn't the Authority said something about the *inevitability* of such gaps?

Suddenly resolved, I get out of the car and, measuring my steps, start back  
in the direction of the hotel.

8

9

I sit under the table closest to the bar, incensed with the 'Authority'. Why has he  
waited so long to explain my role in the hotel? Certainly in retrospect it all  
makes sense – the positioning of the astrological coasters; my becoming lost  
after visiting the other lounge; even the broken numbers on the rooms – but I see  
no reason why he hadn't chosen to enlighten me before. Unless, of course, his  
motive was simply to oppose me, to master me ...

But could he be right? Could it be that I am nothing more than what I  
articulate in the hotel?

This, demonstrably, would not be the case if I were to burn the hotel down.

And despite what the 'Authority' has said, the astrological coasters will  
guide me. I take from his cloak the Capricorn coaster and bitterly read aloud its  
words:

You are practical. You will have a ... with ... Or will you have it with ... ? (You are also adventurous.) You have both.

I regard the fireplace. Then I study the coaster once more. How can I possibly be considered to be practical when all I do – all I am fated to do – is wander around an empty hotel, trying to fill in the gaps in my life?

Increasingly angry that the ‘Authority’ chose not to defuse the situation, I 74 weigh up whether I can also destroy him. He is almost always at a point farthest from me in the hotel, but with careful plotting I may be able to trap him.

Carefully avoiding the masses of old chewing-gum on the underside of the table, I climb out and approach the bar.

Soon I have found some serviettes. I knot them up tightly, then go to the grate and light them.

I make the sign of the Cross, and start in the direction of the other lounge.

10

The play of flames in the other lounge contrasts with the rain-lashed rose-leaves outside. As I wander round the room, dropping the serviettes over anything ignitable, I wonder how long the fire will take to reach the ‘Authority’. I feel sure the flames will never reach the original lounge. I’m glad. I’ve developed a certain fondness for the original lounge. It had been there, after all, that my mission began.

The last coaster - I seem to have lost Pisces and Aries – is that of the Water-bearer. Its circles are an entrancing green. I read:

Congratulations. This is the age of Aquarius. You are making new friends every day. This is no mere whim of fate, it is your imaginative ...

Do not lose your chance of success. Practise regularly.

The coaster's words provide me with a feeling of harmony. Soon, I tell myself, I'll have erased the wooden frame of my imprisonment. I'll have a whole new Being.

11

12

**VANESSA KIRKPATRICK**

## The balcony

*Helsinki, 26th May 1988*

Dear friend, imagine you are here.

Almost fifty years since last we met.

The coffee pot is still kept warm all day.

My brother Rolf passed away this winter.

The coffin – covered with spruce branches –  
was lowered into cold ground.

His wife wept floods of tears.

In my mind, I spoke to you

(perhaps I whispered audibly).

Imagine, mornings I sit here on the balcony

wrapped in a blanket – sip my coffee

just as we did then, *Schwesterchen*, before the war.

Do you remember swimming together at Drumsö?

Afterwards we'd sunbake on the rocks,

fancying ourselves a pair of Loreleis.

My life – it has been friendship not romance.

My neighbour Ulli is like a daughter.

Next month we travel to her summer house

in the Ingå archipelago.

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We'll look out over the Baltic – me, an old spinster,  
and she – pregnant with her first child.

The Baltic where I last hugged you –  
*Auf Wiedersehen*, you said, and I, *Adjö*.

But here, tread carefully, for this  
is what I want to show you. Here,  
amongst the pine sprigs in my balcony boxes.

A green finch's nest with five blue-grey eggs.

And wait, she has arrived, fluffing green  
and yellow feathers in spring sunshine.

She took the cotton wool I offered  
when it snowed in March.

Now the whole clan visit for sunflower seeds.

My balcony is their dining table!

Who would have thought our stories would end here?

Sometimes when I talk to you, I miss you more.

But still, it could be worse. For though she (and you) have flown  
this morning I held warm life in the palm of my hand.

Note: this poem is based on letters to my grandmother from her childhood

friend, Dolly Blomqvist. Schwesterchen means little sister in German, and *Auf Wiedersehen* literally until we see each other again. *Adjö* is Swedish for adieu.

77

**ANDY KISSANE**

## Caught

You're such an outdoor man, I don't know  
how I'm going to survive the sweat,  
the peeling skin, the wind messing with my hair.  
I don't have the walking boots for a Sunday stroll  
from Balmoral Beach to Manly; I throw up  
on your friend's yacht as we prowl  
about the harbour. And the prospect of abseiling,  
hang-gliding and whitewater rafting fills me  
with terror. A whole week in the bush  
without a shower, a toilet and a decent espresso  
is as appealing as time travel to the Stone Age.  
Whatever happened to fine dining, gin  
and tonics on a moonlit terrace, the art  
of conversation, a slow and civilised seduction?  
I suffer in silence, for now. There are advantages.  
Your generous lips, how ardently you hold my hand,  
how well you listen. You navigate, while I swat  
flies, stub my toe and stumble on shifting rocks,  
until we arrive at a secluded pool



surrounded by blackbutt and red gums.  
You undress casually, without embarrassment  
or an apology, so I follow suit. I dive  
into a clarity so pure that I wish I could  
preserve it and return often. Naked,  
you swim towards me, grinning. Suddenly,  
you rise out of the dark green water and I see  
glistening drops as they cling to long lashes,  
how your arm stretches out to haul me in.

78

**MRAN-MAREE LAING**

## **The raw faces**

You brought me up among the immaculate, faces packed away  
before dawn. If anyone had another idea,

it was quieted. Life was your gift, not my burden.

As I have grown older, I no longer believe—

your face, once a pool reflecting the sky, caught me,  
dragged me out to sea.

Did you never consider this? The sunlit earth

you gave me, did it ever turn, or did we always

walk in the walled garden?

Beneath the waves is hot and silent — as I sink

we enter your transcendent night. Fish cast incandescent

bait, communion wafer becomes bleak blooded and bone.

You can't raise a fairytale: please

tell me the raw faces, including our own.

79

**GARY LANGFORD**

## **p154**

A critic rains heavily on his latest novel,  
asserting all his work is built on the one page:  
murder, the narrator wakes up as a serial killer,  
(sales are poor, stretching to match the murders);  
greed, *p154* is the only generous one to readers,  
(optimism holds the key to the cape of hope);  
romance is desperate, stars in the universe of content,  
(readers divorce on the grounds of indifference).  
The critic concludes there is psychology in *p154*.  
The closest he gets is a page of empty dreams.  
He bunkers down when *p154* is fashionable.  
Four novels become one in four sections from *p154*.  
The reprint is the closest he gets to a best seller, briefly.  
*p154* is the title, running away with the print run.  
And with it public interest at the door of *p154*.

80

**WES LEE**

## **Airbnb Weekend**

They seemed golden.

You kept saying they were golden.

The woman pregnant

with a skin of health, an impossible pelt.

There are angels

they're just

young.

Welcome they said

and turned to show us through the house.

Nobody wants to hear about

a difficult time.

I thought of the balloons that seemed

savagely inappropriate;

the flowers sent from the office

the day after:

stiff wax sentinels, no disguising what they were.

I'd roared then beat them,

shredded on the kitchen counter.

We followed them in,

the key on the bench;  
their car packed like ours,  
like mirrors  
parked in the driveway.

Barefoot, she moved her strong brown legs  
smiling over her shoulder  
at her husband, Michael

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(greenstone bullets in each ear).

Later I found a coaster with  
the meanings of his name:

*From the Hebrew*

*meaning 'who is*

*like the Lord'. He is*

*handsome, hardworking*

*and successful, easy-going*

*and light-hearted. A wise man.*

I deferred from setting a coffee cup down.

And you lifted a framed photo from the shelf

and said he seems familiar

he must be in a band?

Could you feed our worms

she said?

They're fussy—they don't like citrus.

*We'll feed them*

*We will feed them*

and the punch-drunk tom

sat on the compost lid like a battered prince,

and it should have felt

like adventure

and it should have felt

like it used to.

It should have felt like the beach

the rocks there, the sea behind as testament.

82

Alison Lesley

WEIGHTLESS

**H**oney, there's a bear at the door."

I cross the apartment in seconds and peer through the peep-hole. "Shit."

On the other side of the door, the bear glances at his watch anxiously, his claws tightening around the black briefcase he holds.

"It's over," Ashley says, resting one hand on the door handle.

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do.”

She looks at my hands. They’re stained with black ink, like splatters of dark blood. I hurry over to the sink, and turn the tap on hard. Water splashes across my shirt, drips down the bench, but the ink won’t come off. I scrub and scrub, but it won’t come off. And here comes the bear. He knocks again – a low, dull, quick sound, like a heavy rock wrapped in cotton, beating against the wooden frame.

“Anyone home?” the bear calls, his voice gravelly.

“Open it,” I hiss, gesturing wildly with dripping hands, “open it.”

Ashley cracks the door open as much as the brass security chain will allow. “Yes?”

“Evening, ma’am,” says the bear, as he tries to peer around her into the apartment, “May I come in?”

“Give me a minute,” she says, “I’m not dressed.”

She closes the door. Her eyes scan the apartment; it’s littered with freshly-inked posters and leaflets. There are inkpots and a silk screen on the dining table, illuminated only by a butane lamp. “Shit,” she sighs, “we’ve got to get rid of this.”

We bundle the stacks of still-drying paper into our quivering arms and hide them around the apartment: in the cupboards that we repainted after we moved in; beneath the couch that we struggled up three flights of stairs with; in the fridge that we bought in cream even though I wanted it in white. I’m squeezing the silk screen behind the broken radiator when Ashley grabs my arm. We pause. There’s a faint scratching at the door, the metallic scrape of claw on metal doorknob, and the tentative testing of the door’s strength. I shove

Ashley gently in the direction of the door. She pushes back against my touch.

“Go,” I whisper, “let him in.”

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She opens the door and the bear ducks his head as he enters. His dark form immediately feels too big for the apartment, like he takes up the whole kitchen.

He flashes his credentials, before returning them to his briefcase. He looks us up and down. His eyes have no whites, like human eyes; they’re entirely black like smooth stones just beneath the surface of a clear stream.

“What’s this regarding?” I ask, holding my ink-covered hands behind my

back. The bear takes slow steps, his gaze roaming the apartment, from chair to bookcase, to lamp, and across the patchy ceiling, with its paint peeling like dead skin. His shaggy black fur bristles, swelling in inky waves as he moves, slipping like black silk over soft hips. “We received a tip-off that someone in this building might be producing certain material,” the bear says finally,

“material that may be anti-ursine in nature.”

Ashley nods, her shoulders squared. “I see.”

“We’re going door-to-door,” the bear adds.

He rests his briefcase on the radiator, and parts the closed blinds, bending the thin buckling metal and peering out the window. We remain by the door.

“How long have you two lived here?”

“Five years,” Ashley replies.

“Nearly five years,” I say, “it’ll be five years this May. Bit of a milestone I guess.”

I turn to smile at Ashley, but she’s watching the bear. He is moving back towards the kitchen, towards us. “Do you work in the city?”



“Yes,” I nod.

He opens a cupboard, one taloned claw hooked through the handle. There are no posters in it, just a half-empty shelf of half-empty jars. He closes the cupboard door slowly. He glances over his shoulder and nods to the pan on the stove. It’s still filled with fat drippings from the evening’s meal.

“Do you usually eat so late?”

“I work until 7,” I say.

“Sometimes he gets home at 9,” Ashley adds, staring blankly at the floor.

“And what do you fill the rest of the evening with?” the bear asks.

“Reading mostly.”

“We watch a lot of TV,” Ashley says.

I rest my stained hands on the lip of the counter, still obscuring them behind my back. The bear moves to leave the kitchen then stops. The corner of a poster is peeking out from beneath the fridge, one tiny white triangular toe, curled with wet ink and encrusted with dust and grease. I lean against the bench, my hand feeling for the pan still on the stove behind me. I wrap my fingers around the handle, and lift it until it’s hovering above the element. My 84 body feels off balance, my wrist drawn taut with the weight of the cast iron, as the fat drippings swirl around in the pan and its weight dips from side to side. The bear bends to get a better look beneath the fridge. He places a claw on the piece of paper and drags it from its hiding place, leaving a long gash in the floorboards.

“What’s this?” he asks.

I raise the pan above me and bring it down hard on the bear’s head.

Drippings fly across the room like the sparks of a firework. He roars, collapsing to the ground with a deep thump, like a boulder on soft grass. The roar simmers down to a low bubbling grumble, then silence. Ashley hurries to kneel beside the bear. Dark blood is already oozing from the base of his skull, matting his sleek fur. She holds a hand in front of his snout.

“He’s dead,” she says, “he’s not breathing, he’s dead.”

“I only hit him once.”

“It only takes once, you fucking idiot. Now we have a dead fucking bear in our living room.”

“I just meant to knock him out, to give us a chance to escape.”

“You never think. You just do.”

She fingers the blood the spreading across the floorboards like liquid jam.

She holds up three fingers, sticky with blood, slightly spread in a poor imitation of the girl guides’ salute.

“Look what you’ve done.”

“Yeah, I can see,” I shout, “I can see, I’m not blind.”

We sit there in silence for several long moments, she crouched beside the still-warm mass of fur, me leaning back on the counter for support. I throw down the pan. Its clatter is deafening.

“So what are we gonna do?” I ask, “How do we fix it?”

“We can’t fix *this*, he’s *dead*,” she hisses, “God, you’re thick.”

She stands, wiping the blood on the leg of her jeans.

“I’m thick? You just smeared evidence all over yourself.”

“Shut up, and help me with this.”

She drags the rug from beside the couch. With considerable effort, we roll the bear’s body on to it, our hands gripping soft fur and our feet slipping across the floorboards.

“He’s too big,” she mutters, glancing around the apartment, “we need to tie it around him with something.”

She marches across the room, and rips at the cord of the vacuum cleaner, hacking through the wire veins with a kitchen knife. We tie up the furry bundle, and drag it towards the door, one of us on each end, she pulling and me pushing.

85

The hallway is empty. There’s no one on the stairwell that winds away above and below us in sharp concrete angles. The rugged-up corpse flops down each step. I chuckle.

“Do you remember when we heaved that damn couch up these stairs,” I say, “and when we were lifting it over the rail it tipped and almost crushed me? Do you remember that?”

“Not really.”

We reach the car park in silence, and undisturbed by other living creatures.

I open the back door of my car, as Ashley keeps watch, still clutching one end of the rug. There’s a pink lacy bra on the backseat. I glance over my shoulder, but Ashley is staring out into the night, seemingly distracted. I toss it away, and it lands beneath the driver’s seat, out of view. We bundle the bear into the car. My back and legs ache under the tremendous weight of the body. Its thick muscles now limp, it flops like a rag-doll filled with lead. We cover it with the rug, and it becomes no more than a nondescript dark lump. The car’s suspension groans, the back end sitting low over the wheels like heavily lidded eyes. I drive, pulling out

of the driveway faster than I should.

“Slow down, you’ll get us noticed.”

We ride mostly in silence. She keeps her arms folded tightly across her chest, gazing into the rear view mirror, as the road disappears behind us like cassette tape unspooling.

“I’m sorry,” I mumble, my eyes fixed on the road ahead.

“You never think,” she says, “you do what you want and you don’t think of the consequences.”

“Look, we’ll get through it, alright? It’s gonna be fine.”

“You don’t care who you hurt,” she says.

The whole car feels off balance, the back end weighed down with the bear’s corpse. Or maybe it’s the pink bra, hiding beneath the car seat like a scarlet letter.

\*

A siren erupts from behind us. Blue lights beam through the back window, turning us into silhouettes.

“I told you to slow down,” she mutters.

I pull the car over. The police officer is a bear. She taps on the window with her claw and leans down until her face is level with mine.

“Going a little fast there, sir,” she says, “got somewhere to be?”

Her lips draw back with each word, unsheathing sharp, yellowing teeth. I can feel her hot breath dancing across my cheeks.

“Just out for a drive,” I say, “I didn’t notice how fast I was going. It won’t happen again.”

“License and registration please.”

I reach into the glove box and my wallet and hand them over. The officer takes them in one hand, fiddling with an electronic device with the other.

There’s a thud from the back seat. I hold my breath. Again, a faint tapping, a scratching, its echo clawing at the back of my skull even when it’s stopped. The officer glances up at us. I feign a smile. She looks down at her device again. I am intensely alive, immensely aware of my body; the pressure of the floor mats against my shoes, against my feet; the way my clothes cling to my body like

arms wrapped around my shoulders. I readjust the collar of my shirt. There’s the scratching again. I glance at Ashley to see if she hears it too, to see if it’s really there, but she’s staring straight ahead, down the road that disappears out beyond the reach of the headlights. The car seat is a sweaty palm on my back.

The seatbelt presses against my chest like the weight of an ocean. I drum my fingers on the steering wheel.

“Slow down next time,” says the officer, handing me back the licence, along with a ticket.

From then on, we stick to the speed limit, and eventually reach a lake. I pull off the road into the muddy ditch that runs alongside the dead highway.

We drag the bear from the backseat. He’s cold now, his body stiffening. His face is protruding from the top of the rug. I gaze at his little round ears, the rounded faced with lighter brown fur around the face.

“You were right,” I whisper, so only the bear can hear, “it’s dead. It was dead the whole time.”

We roll the body over the lip of a hill, and towards the lake below. The bear rolls down the slope, flattening the tall grass, limp arms flailing around him. He hits the water with a heavy splash, and sinks beneath the surface. From amongst the blackness of the lake, emerges a deeper blackness – the bear’s sinking form, suddenly weightless as paper on the breeze. Ashley and I don’t hold hands. She lets out a long sigh, like it’s the first breath she’s taken since the bear arrived.

“Do you want a lift to the station?” she asks.

“No, I can walk.”

We never say goodbye.

87

Rosanna Licari

#### ALL SAINTS’ EVE

It was done. The soil, rock, chunks of concrete and gravel that surrounded her house like remnants of a war were gone. In their place was a concrete driveway with paths leading to the back of the house. It was a decision she should’ve made ten years ago but she was afraid of the debt and she never seemed to get on top of things after the end of her marriage. Never enough money and never enough time.

Katerina brushed back her long black hair from her face as the cat rubbed itself against her calf. She began scratching the eczema on her upper arm.

It always felt like that after a stressful day at the hospital. She picked up the amethyst pebble she always had nearby. Her massage therapist had told her it was supposed to have a calming effect. She’d also begun to meditate and had set up a little shrine in the garden. It was a way of worshipping in another way.

After her divorce, she rarely went to church.

Katerina took the grappa out of the kitchen cupboard. A brew one of her father's friends, Hinko, had made with a mate years ago. Giorgio had a property outside of Sydney. He'd been a farmer in the old country. All the old boys had some kind of hobby. Her uncle, Adam, made beer and also liked to bottle tomatoes with his wife. Then there was Mario who had turned some disused shed into a smoking room for sausages. Her father, Lucky, had enough to do looking after the laying hens. The old boys all knew each from the migrant clubs in Sydney. They grew this and that, and made whatever they felt like, legal or not. Old habits die hard.

Katerina went outside onto the front porch to take a good look at the expanse of concrete. It looked almost like silver water in the late afternoon light. "To the new driveway," she toasted and took a sip. Firewater. It was infused with rue and sage because Hinko said it was medicinal. Tradition or something.

Once when she was a teenager, he had explained that it was made from pomace: the skins, pulp, seeds and stem of the grapes. She didn't pay too much attention.

She wasn't interested in the hobbies of old men.

Inside she prepared a jar of lollies in case some of the neighbours' kids came trick or treating. She planned to pop in and see her mother as well. She liked to make her feel secure. There'd been a lot of changes in her mother's life.

Her father had been watching the proceedings from next door for days.

He didn't have much to do these days. He turned around to his friends in the 88 sunroom. The bunch of old men he'd known for years.

He explained, "They pulled up the old concrete and those useless pavers. It took the builder to convince her she didn't need grass growing in between them.

No one listens to me.”

“No one listens to any of us,” Adam, her uncle, added.

“Not anymore,” Mario added.

“Not ever!” Hinko concluded.

They saw a lit candle in a lantern and vase full of daisies in the front garden among the parsley in Katerina’s garden. “It’s going to seed,” Adam said.

“It doesn’t grow for everyone, you know? She might have the magic touch.”

They all nodded.

“There’s no picture of Jesus or Mary,” Hinko asked. “Is she becoming one of those weird people. You know? What are they called?” .

Her father answered, “Pagana. You mean pagan.”

“Is that like a witch?” Hinko continued.

“Strega? They travel on brooms,” Adam added. “There’s no broom here.

Look at the driveway. There are leaves on it.”

They all laughed.

“I didn’t teach her anything,” her father lamented. “Can’t she just hose it down like I taught her?”

“That’s what the young ones are like today. They don’t listen to their parents,” Hinko said.

Outside all of the old men stood at the top of the new driveway in the dark.

The moon was in the first quarter.



“How long has Katerina been divorced now?” Hinko asked.

“Forever,” Lucky replied

“She should’ve married one of our boys, not an Australian. Has she got a boyfriend yet?”

“No,” her father answered.

They all shook their heads.

“A full moon on Thursday” Mario observed.

“A good job,” Lucky said looking at the driveway and took a sip of Hinko’s grappa. He turned to him. “I think I can really taste Giorgio’s plums in this.”

They had tried a new recipe.

“He’s a true artist,” remarked Adam after he took a sip of his.

The phone rang. It was Katerina’s mother ringing from next door. “I can feel him. He’s here,” her mother said.

“You always say this on this day every year.”

“Can’t you feel anything? And you do all that rubbish stuff with your funny friends.”

“Mamma, my friend, is a massage and crystal therapist. It’s called

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complementary medicine.”

“What is she? A witch doctor?”

“Oh, Mamma. I’ll come in later. I’ve got a headache.” Katerina didn’t have

a headache but if she kept talking to her mother she was sure she'd get one.

She scratched her arm and then took the last swig of grappa before going out onto the front porch again to look at the concrete driveway. Her father and his friends loved concrete. All the old wogs did. Wog. That was what she got called at school. She just wanted to be Australian.

Katerina noticed the wind had blown some leaves onto the driveway. She

went out into the garden. The men stepped back into the shadows. Katerina

turned on the hose and adjusted the nozzle to give a hard, direct flow. She began at the top of the driveway like her father had shown her years ago. When she did this the old men turned to each other and smiled. "She's going to miss a bit,"

her father said. "I'll do it later." They left silently.

After Katerina had fed the cat, she decided to go next door. She brought the lolly jar as well as a jar of olives she'd got from the Italian grocery store. Her mother heard her coming and let her in. "Do you want a coffee?" her mother asked.

"OK. Just a short black."

"I know you don't believe me but it's always the same. I have the same feeling." Katerina rolled her eyes and her mother noticed.

"Mamma, Papá is dead. The whole bunch of them died on that coach

tour..." he stopped herself from going on. She couldn't believe she had just said that. She finished the sentence in her mind "... through the vineyards three years ago."

"Oh, for all your talk of peace and calm, and crystal this and massage that, Katerina, you really don't have any feelings, do you?" Her mother began to cry.

Then she felt even worse when her mother sobbed, "Just go home and leave me alone."

She noticed her mother had lit a candle beside the picture of her father on the mantelpiece. Katerina knew her mother struggled being on her own. She was never nice when she was overtired. “I’m sorry,” Katerina said, and began to scratch.

“I’ve just had a really bad day at work. One of the patients unexpectedly ...” She finished the sentence in her mind “... died.” She then hugged her mother tightly.

As she did, Katerina could see her concrete driveway through the window from over her mother’s shoulder. The sensor light had turned on and she thought she saw someone there. She let go of her mother and went to the glass louvres but all that was there was her cat and she seemed to have left the hose on as water was running down the driveway.

She turned to her mother, “We’ll go to church and the cemetery tomorrow.”

“Thank you. I miss your father so much.”

90

Natalya Lowndes

## THE PROFESSIONALS

After the tanks drove out of the city Vanya discovered ‘commerce’ was the new buzzword.

Zhenya led the way to a place Vanya’s old Brigadier would have called ‘the bohemian part of town,’ a quarter where passé dissidents, washerwomen, hustlers and painters, drug lords, aerosol daubers, writers of slogans and unperformable epic dramas had made their own.

This was the hole from where tank-strippers had emerged, alongside street debaters and picketers, watched on the TVs of half the world.

Once Vanya would have found the neighbourhood intriguing with drab

little shops where the assistants were rude And the square at night in the hot weather, the tarts in their red culottes and Robin Hood jackets, blonde, all of them. Picturesque? That isn't the word, Zhenya used to say, it's the infestation of a townscape with birds of paradise.

Not now, though. Now, Vanya thought, we'll end up beggars, crushed like flies, grovelling or shot. They could wither away under the new regime.

Speculators and risk takers at heart, weren't they? All of them were probably speculators, denounced on the radio as a 'criminal element to be liquidated.'

They called themselves soldiers, protectors of the people but now they were outcasts.

"Are you stupid or what?" Zhenya was shouting. "Today we've been betrayed, all of us. White wolves are running in Moscow."

He was given to eccentric phrases.

Vanya felt in a stupor, unable to take it in – would someone be coming to liquidate *both of them*?

Who could help and where could they go?

\*

The apartment smelt of apples and beeswax. Three crudely-painted wooden soldiers were ranged alongside a fissured ikon and a set of green alabaster bowls on top of an immense linen chest that occupied the length of one wall.

Vanya and Zhenya sat on uncomfortable whitewood chairs and accepted glasses of tea from a silent old woman in a fluffy brown shawl . Vanya wanted to  
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know who she was but at that moment a girl appeared, gracefully long-legged

and swaying in a skimpy skirt, placing her narrow bare feet carefully, avoiding the rugs on the floor. Her black hair was razor-cut down to an inch or so all over her head.

The *babushka* stood still, her back to the press, eyes closed. In total silence the girl curled down at the old woman's feet, and brought out a half-smoked cigarette that spotted ash down the front of her blouse.

"Good afternoon," said Vanya. Nobody responded or moved except the girl who lit her cigarette very slowly. By now, feeling slightly hysterical Vanya whispered to Zhenya that perhaps they should go. "That old dear's in a trance. Is this some kind of church?"

Zhenya frowned. "You think you know these people?"

When Vanya looked back to the *babushka* she was knitting something long, white and tubular. "What's she knitting?"

At this the crop-headed girl got up and from the other room came a boy with a moustache carrying a long dish on which lay a half-sliced sausage. The expression on his face was so distraught Vanya fancied if his hands were free he would have been wringing them.

"I am Aleks and this is my sister, Darya," he said. "She has plans. She wants to see Australia."

"She must be mad," said Vanya decisively.

"Darya," Aleks called. The crop-haired beauty came over and took Vanya's hand. "Darya, this gentleman knows about Australia."

Fuelled by Crimean champagne the old lady brought out of the linen press Zhenya grew eloquent about what he called the 'wild market,' and lectured

them on the crucial nature of trade and the founding of a co-operative. They were to be entrepreneurs, the seed-corn of the future.

Vanya found himself wondering what Zhenya could have in common with Aleks, Darya and Granny.

“You don’t understand, it will be like the Post Room,” said his friend.

\*

As a young recruit Vanya had done a spell in the Post Room. The run-out went from Head GPO in Gorky Street to a hunting lodge with a spread of orange-stuccoed stables grouped in a clearing surrounded by birches. It stood a couple of kilometres from the airport. The ground was tussocky where uneradicated

birch growth protruded, snagging the mail-sacks when they were pulled out of the van.

Vanya had dragged the sacks with misshapen, convict lettering: FOREIGN

92

PACKETS OUT written all over them, but that was when they were forced to improvise before the sorting office got computers.

About twenty of them had been stuck there during the winter of ’85 when

snow had cut off all light from the windows and they worked under neon, but

when Zhenya arrived things changed. He was different from the others, a small, spare man with a winning manner and long curly hair covering the scar at the side of his head. Rather decadent, Vanya thought.

Zhenya had been recruited from Vnukovo where his Section Head at

Customs had marked his Personnel Card ART HISTORICAL, after promoting

him. This leg-up had come after Zhenya had prised a fourteenth-century

triptych of St Simeon, flanked by the Archangels Michael and Gabriel, from the

inner lining of a gun-case, and found four twenty-rouble gold coins of Nicolas II jammed into the extractor-box of a Tula.410. It was a hunting-party, and

the leader, an evil-looking Georgian in peeling sheepskins, trod on his hand as Zhenya was breaking out the barrels on the office lino. Then he offered Zhenya the coins, a carpet-bag full of one-litre bottles of *Kubanskaya* mixed up with sprouting onions, and, finally, the gun. Leaning over to whisper something after he'd been refused, he bit off Zhenya's ear.

Vanya admired Zhenya's way of coping with his mutilation, a hero, some

said, He cultivated a mixture of other-worldliness and common sense and after they were re-assigned Zhenya was promoted, even travelling abroad. Vanya

was never considered officer material and failed the selection course but knew it was sometimes better to lie low, never realising how good a strategy that was until 1991 and that August in Moscow when the communists fell.

\*

Two days after the revolution Vanya got a message: go to the Covered

Market. There he found Zhenya's first commercial outlet – a kiosk of the old Soyuzpechat variety, a former newspaper booth, one of many that straggled out in the direction of a long squat station to founder in a mess of rubbish, and old women hawking bras and handbrooms in the gutter.

Inside it was poky and dark with scarcely room for one high stool and a

safe. By early evening he and Darya had set out the stock and were standing

shoulder to shoulder in the hissing glow of the lamps, sharing a cigarette, when a militiaman rapped on the glass with his night stick: naked light, not allowed.

Vanya rang Zhenya from the station concourse and he snapped: "Bung

him currency".

Zhenya clearly had enormous pull. Vanya could tell from the militiaman's

reaction when he was fed his bribe. He only had to mention Zhenya's name

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and the man went pale. They all knew something but so what? Zhenya might be deep in his own play but at least he was playing on Vanya's side.

Zhenya had been right. It was a bit like the Post Room but now instead of other people's letters it was wool in, knitting out. Vanya was entrusted with foreign currency, mainly dollars, to pay the suppliers, while Aleks acted as runner. Zhenya's first consignment of wool turned out to be decent stuff.

Rather too much mohair in the mixture, or so Darya said, but perfect for shawls and motif-patterned sweaters.

Granny knitted and so did another old lady called Lena while Darya flitted about sorting wool and knitting imperturbably, probably the best in the circle as she recited aloud passages from a novel by Charlotte M. Yonge in order to perfect her English for the day when she would set foot in New South Wales, a convict's dream in reverse.

Vanya had never met a more disparate group of people. Old Lena, the Granny's knitting partner, thought she saw devils on TV while the Granny thought she was a good knitter. Both were probably clinically insane.

They were, he discovered, a dysfunctional family. Aleks was the only man.

Papa had disappeared long ago and nobody talked about him. Darya and the *babushka* seemed to exist on Aleks' sufferance in spite of the girl's plans for emigration.

Aleks and she were twins – fraternal, wasn't it obvious? – so entirely dissimilar they had nothing in common, except their age, of course, which was thirty, far older than Vanya had first guessed. Why live here with him, Vanya



asked her? Obviously he knew nothing of the bond between brother and sister.

No words could express its profundity, according to Darya.

“Really,” said Vanya. “I’m glad I’ve no brothers or sisters. I don’t think I’d care for an inexpressible relationship.”

Right out of the blue came the staggeringly illogical statement: “Aleks admires you very much. You are a real entrepreneur.”

What had Zhenya been telling them?

Old Lena produced magnificent examples of sweaters and legwarmers

every week. A real demon with the needles, but she loathed serving in the kiosk itself. So did Granny. Consequently the day-to-day running was left to Darya, Aleks, Vanya and Zhenya’s hangers-on, three girls in black drainpipes and their boy friends. They turned up night after night, equipped with candles in case of power cuts and spare batteries so the stereo could always deliver Brigade S or Nantilino Pompelius or Viktor Troy. Vanya learned that Che Guevara berets

were still in and blue denim jackets with studs. It was like a bikers’ conference in Havana except for one or two young boys in very long camel hair overcoats who wore fringed scarves that trailed to the ground. They reminded him of Zhenya,  
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with brilliantined, flicked-back hair, reminiscent of modishly bisexual young intelligentsia of St Petersburg, *circa* 1916.

Sometimes the crowd at Vanya’s *guichet* blocked the way to other kiosks and at the end of the first week, Vanya reckoned the knitting co-operative was slightly in profit. Any hard currency (they got the odd, adventurous tourist now and again) was divided – 50% to plough back, the rest to Zhenya.

It was here Darya met her first Antipodean, a middle-aged New Zealand woman, rucksack on back, quite alone, who wanted a jumper to go with her jet-black dyed hair. She fell on an elaborately-appliquéd number that Lena had

knitted from an Argyllshire pattern which had never been nearer to Russia than Aberdeen.

Zhenya's absences became more frequent and Darya, re-arranging the stock one morning, nearly jumped out of her skin when he came up silently and straightened out the bar of the awning that some drunk had been swinging on the night before.

Flushing beneath her foundation cream Darya carried on as if he were not there. She had grown to distrust him despite his generosity to the group. Vanya poked his head out amidst the angora mittens and be-ribboned tam o' shanters strung at eye-catching level inside the window. Over Zhenya's shoulder he spotted an emerald green Ford Cosworth parked slap across the pavement. The moment

he saw the car he thought; I've suspected this for some time: he's leaving .

Darya watched his back and made faces.

"She doesn't like you." Vanya tried to sound jokey.

"Nerves." Zhenya delivered a savage jab with his cane to a broken packing-case. "I suffer myself, I'm sweating. Who would not suffer amongst all those ... those market parasites? "He shuddered theatrically. " We're off out of it, my friend, a little holiday, a break ..."

"Oh yes?"

"Oh yes. Next week you and I fly to the new world: Melbourne, Australia.

All booked."

Caught off guard, Vanya catalogued his objections: Darya, Granny, Aleks and the business.

“What business?” snapped Zhenya. “That knitting circle? You and I are soldiers. Let women manage the knitting.”

“You always know what to do, don’t you?” He might be a hero but Zhenya was tyrannical and Vanya wondered if it was the result of having a mauled ear.

“You’re thinking of the old days and the Post Room,” mused Zhenya. “We were soldiers then, so why not soldiers again?”

“The others depend on me. And there’s Darya.”

“Bring her with you, this isn’t your life or hers. In three months she’ll be 95 in hospital, in six she’ll be dead.” Zhenya had started to pick his nails with a matchstick

“What’s going on?” Vanya almost shouted. “You’ve changed.”

“Have I?”

“You know you have, otherwise I wouldn’t be asking. What have you been up to all this time?”

Zhenya came out with his familiar insult: “Are you stupid or what? Isn’t it obvious?” He studied Vanya languidly, chewing the Lucifer end of his matchstick.

Vanya was incensed. “That’s not very nice, calling me stupid. We had a deal and that little kiosk means a lot to Darya.”

“Play my game and you can get a hundred kiosks and give her them all.”

Vanya let Darya scoot him round the back of the kiosk and jam him inside. She clung to his arm, eyes closed, muttering: “Don’t do as he says, don’t abandon

us.” He tried to tell her he had never thought of Zhenya going away, had never foreseen it.

In the apartment he, Darya, Granny and Aleks kept going. The business prospered and Darya suggested opening another stall.

\*

Vanya’s realisation that Zhenya had left them fused with new plans. Zhenya had known loneliness, had gazed upon perspectives Vanya had never seen. He

too had been a soldier, but they were abandoned by those who would be glad to see them destroyed by the wild marketeers. Overnight party functionaries had become churchgoers, just as they had plunged into the wild market and made

it work.

In early spring he had a message from somewhere called Merlynston and in the summer a picture postcard of a football stadium. ‘Australia is the place for professionals!’ ran the message. He hoped Zhenya would come back one day, and the more he relied on expecting his friend the more he felt Zhenya would never return to the market and, Vanya imagined, one day the market itself would not be there. The candy striped awnings of the booths would go and nothing remain except a broad walkway.

Would Darya would ever make it to Australia? Everyone was packing up to leave – Australia, the US, Israel, the UK – everyone had dreams , so he might even follow Zhenya when the time was right.

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Julie Maclean

JOEL AND JESS ON THE VERGE

Three flights up Joel got to the last scuffed step finding himself on the fake lawn of a Disney film set slap bang in the middle of the city three days

before his wedding. *Holy Fuck. Where's everyone gonna park and what's with the pink ...* he didn't say.

## **The Rehearsal**

Six months earlier it had seemed like a good idea for what would be a

smallish affair with family and friends. They'd been there after work on a Friday night. Several shooters later, seduced by fairy lights and shadows cast by garden trellis, *Madame's* was quirky, different and came in under budget.

In the fading light of five pm late May it looked plain tacky. Joel had been entertained at glossy wine bars now that he was in Finance. Jess, on the other hand, spent half her life in grungy cafés with fellow journos writing up notes for the Health section of a worthy but failing broadsheet. She felt at home in *Madame's*.

Up there at peak hour a botched skyline mocked him, all 360 concrete

degrees of it. The backs of the older high rise were scarred by rust stains and escape ladders and *Madame's* was a bunch of dodgy chairs from the Salvos and laminex tables from the Fifties.

*Stiff quiffs, soft cocks, shit music.*

He was off again, monkey brain in full flight through the trees of a far, far jungle trying to smile through clenched teeth in an effort to please. *Madame's* was more Jess's thing, like babies.

**Jess:** *I really love the lawn, don't you?*

**Joel:** *Mmm.*

**Jess :**

*So witty.*

**Joel :** *Yeah.*

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**Jess :**

*Where shall we stand?*

In a vat of boiling oil.

All that Fifties tat transported Joel to his early life on the family farm when everything seemed smeared with fat or covered in dust. He'd loathed his life in the country the minute he became conscious of the way it sucked life out through sheer graft and brute machinery. He'd never got used to the spectacle of sheep ravaged by feral dogs, intestines spilling from gaping arses, not quite dead.

By the time he was twelve he hadn't learned to swim. Exasperated, his

father had thrown him into the dam to force him to stay afloat. Joel, gasping and spluttering had almost drowned.

Joel suffered long silences between his parents after arguments, usually about the bank balance or lack of rain. He'd been sent to stay with his grandparents for school holidays. They lived in a permanent vegetal stench with the volume of the television up so loud he thought his ears would bleed. He had never been so bored.

Forced to use the green toilet seat on a recent visit when he and Jess had

announced their engagement Joel's thinking had gone like this:

*How high do E coli jump?*

*Can you catch Ebola from someone else's phone?*

*What kind of father will I be?*

Jess, on the other hand had been raised by divorced but doting parents.

Her mother, the greatest influence, enjoyed wind chimes in the garden and the gentle acoustics of a mud brick home. Among her many mantras would be...

Try everything once. Lead a stimulating and challenging life. Carpe Diem!

Jess wanted to make a proper family, one that would stick it out through the good and the bad, in sickness and in health.

**Jess**

*Joelly. Where do think we should stand? What about here?*

**Joel**

*Wherever you want, babe.*

She'd already made up her mind. From where she had positioned herself and from where Joel stood, the spire of St Pat's seemed to be coming out of her head like a conical penis. He stood dutifully beside her without mentioning the architectural intrusion.

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**Joel**

*What if it rains?*

**Jess**

*We can go inside, remember?*



**Joel**

*Where?*

**Jess**

*Up the rear*

## **Joel**

*What?*

**Jess**

*Up the rear bit... Remember?*

She gave him a knowing look. It was the name of the parlour they would be using if it rained. He'd read it on some brochure Jess had shoved into his hands months before when they were choosing the tasting plate. Joel had smiled then but didn't now. He felt his cheeks flush in something like embarrassment.

Real men rationed smiles. He'd learned that from his dad. He didn't cry either. Just once that he could remember. When he was eight his father had reversed the new John Deere over Joel's puppy, a fox terrier. He'd cried and cried.

As for where they should stand as lambs to the slaughter he didn't have a clue.

At that moment he was aware of engines roaring below. A truck must have been grinding its way up Bourke Street and the diesel fumes hit Joel either for real or in his imagination. Feeling faint he sat down on the nearest chair. The stitching was coming undone and what might have been dried meat was stuck in the piping. He picked out the bits and dropped them onto the synthetic lawn. Then he brushed the laminate table top to clean off rogue crumbs where there were none.

**Jess**

*How shall we do the seating?*

**Joel**

*Not sure. We could ask.*

**Jess**

*I'm thinking 'aisle' and maybe five seats either side. Or should it be just random? I don't know. What do you think?*

**Joel**

*Mmmmm. Maybe leave it as it is. Dunno.*

What Joel did know was that Jess had a plum birthmark at the back of her neck. She was in the habit of piling her hair up in a band. Then she would flick it like a horse. Whenever he caught sight of that blemish he had the urge to get a scrubbing brush.

She had never cut her toe nails in front of him. He was thankful for that.

But in their rush to get out of the house that morning he did note she'd forgotten to hang up the bath mat so he imagined bacteria would be partying by the time they got home.

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Meanwhile, spirochetes were partying from another quarter, for as Joel considered the teeming mat, he was unaware of the pale turning heads of germs, burrowing as corkscrews into the pink tissue of his very own dark places.

## **The pale blue shirt**

Joel was the kind of manboy who folded his business shirt, white or pale blue, and placed it in the laundry basket every night. Should a limp arm misbehave and dare to dangle over the edge it was flipped back, socks to follow.

Jess had noticed Joel's little obsessions getting out of hand. In the same week she'd caught him twisting the dial to Super Hot Wash for a single pair of jeans, stained, he said, by a drip from a Starbucks coffee. Tempted to launch into a lecture (Jess, eco-warrior, saving the world single-handed) kept her mouth shut, putting it down to pre-nup nerves. With two days to go they were feeling the pressure.

## The dress

The dress has been a real find—latte lace, vintage retro with a hint of cleavage. A capped sleeve in gauze eliminated any hint of slut. Not that Jess was above ‘slut.’ You should have seen her on her hen’s night. Playboy bunny ears the least of it. That night she volunteered for *Purple Hooters*, *Slippery Nipples*, *Liquid Cocaine* and several *Blow Jobs*. She couldn’t recall if she’d had an *Irish Car Bomb* but it felt like it the next morning. She’d danced with every man in the place, and woman. One long-haired brunette with a strappy top and minimal make-up had been ultra attentive and she’d danced with her more than once.

Jess despised the bling she’d seen in *Bride* magazine adorning waistlines and corseted bodices. What Jess loved were the stories in old things—preloved Fifties dresses with big flowers, bric-a-brac, old chairs with smoothed arms and lined history.

She’d bought a Japanese vase in a rush for five dollars at Vinnies. When she got it home she felt duped and silly when she noted the hairline crack all the way down one side but she shrugged her shoulders, much as her mother would have done, and turned it around with the good side facing out, reassuring herself that nothing is perfect.

Jess, in her early thirties and a year younger than Joel, was feeling her age.

For a start her egg supply was on the wane. The prospect of babies in her late thirties or forties did not appeal. She was clucky. Joel was cute, vulnerable, successful. He’d always straightened her out by giving her the practical point of view. His attention to detail balanced her casual, some might say sloppy inclinations. They were very different, but respectful of their differences, products of their liberal state education.

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**Joel** ... knew what sex was but realised now he has never understood love.

Standing on the bright green of *Madame's* he felt as fake as the lawn.

*Love you Love you Love you*

How many times had he said it to Jess? They said it at the end of every phone call. Why? What did it mean? He saw it now as an act of wishful thinking, of desperation. When he heard himself trot it out, he knew he didn't mean it because he had never felt it.

In the first two years Jess had stirred deep feelings in him. Meeting at ANU over lunch with friends in the café, they'd taken a bottle of wine, a baguette and brie to the gardens, hiked up Kosciusko on a chilly autumn Sunday, learned how to tell the difference between a shiraz and a merlot. They'd been adventurous in bed. Sex with Jess had been something he looked forward to and got excited about. He really felt he'd been connecting with another human being at a deep and special level.

He still felt warm towards her but the passion had gone. For the last three or four years he'd started to feel cheated, already a creature of husbandly habit.

He wanted to be *in love*. How could he go through his whole life feeling less than crotch-achingly, sickeningly, amazingly *in love*. And he started to note the way Jess had certain smells at different times of the month.

He worked hard to keep the rim of the tomato sauce bottle pristine but when it came to sex the juices could run wherever they pleased and the more, the messier the merrier. But they had stopped running over Jess.

Perhaps he had confused love with lust? He didn't know and the not knowing was killing him.

*To the exclusion of all others ... voluntarily entered into for life* shot into his frontal lobe and he felt the urge to vomit. What man wanted to be married? No man. They weren't designed for it.

He replayed the words he'd half heard at their meeting with the celebrant.

... *I am to remind you of the serious and permanent nature of the blah blah blah*  
...

*Fucketty fuck.* And that is exactly what Joel had been doing, but not with Jess's best friend, as you might have expected and as so often happens.

Jess knew... that men fared better in marriage than women even though

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they put up such a fight. Her father had enjoyed a reputation at the golf club as a joker. He'd rarely shown that side of himself at home. It was around the age of twelve that Jess started to see that people had the ability of desert skinks. They could change colour to suit their surroundings.

Sometimes, she was at a loss as to why she wanted to marry Joel so badly.

Why should she want to marry anyone? Women no longer needed men, did they?

It was true, the sex thing wasn't as hot as it had been in the first two years.

These days he seemed to take ages to get going and even longer to come and

she'd find herself revamping the décor in the bedroom until it was over. They rarely kissed now except as brother and sister which she thought was sad.

She'd had the same dream on a few occasions. It was of a house with new

rooms, rooms unfurnished, undiscovered. It had stone fireplaces and was

timber-lined and rambling, like nothing she'd ever lived in. When she woke up and looked at the flat-pack shelves and her jumble of Sixties paraphernalia she felt disappointed.

In the weeks following her hen's night she'd found herself crying quietly after a routine session where she'd experienced a minimal orgasm. She wasn't sure why she'd cried. Maybe it was that *petit mort* she'd read about where every orgasm



heralded a little death. Was marriage a big death, she worried now, but consoled herself with something her mother would have said.

*How can you know happiness if you've never known sadness?*

In recent weeks they'd been writing their own vows and Jess had written these before getting stuck—

I love you. You are my best friend.

I promise to put up with your grumpiness in the mornings, your neat stacks and neat piles and the way you take an hour in the bathroom every morning ...

Jess has sensed Joel's cool reaction at *Madame's*. She'd noticed his blank face, then the way he took on the look of a caged animal when he scanned the vista and the way he sat defeated under the umbrella. How could she trust a man

who seemed to lose his nerve at the last minute. Did he truly love her?

Oh well. They'd come this far. Last minute jitters. She was ready to go through with it. They would go through the ups and downs together and he need never know about her hen's night. It wasn't important, what she could remember of it.

**With less than forty-eight hours to go,** Joel and Jess are sitting at their island  
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bench with a bottle of shiraz, exhausted by phone calls, last minute details, running, running, running, both on edge.

**Jess**

*I'll be going to Mum's first thing. Can I leave you a list?*

**Joel**

*I've got to go into work for a couple of hours.*

**Jess** *What?*

**Joel**

*This conference paper.*

**Jess**

*You're joking. Aren't you picking up the cake?*

**Joel**

*It's this new guy.*

**Jess**

*What new guy?*

**Joel**

*Steve. He's hopeless.*

**Jess**

*Does he know it's the day before your wedding?*

**Joel**

*Sorry, babe. I need to make sure he knows what he's doing.*

**Jess**

*Can't you get someone else to do it?*

**Joel** *Two hours, max. Promise.*

By 1am they were in bed. Joel was planning his morning shower so that he could make sure he was scrubbed and fragrant. He was thinking about what

aftershave he would wear, not for the wedding but for his visit to work the next day. He and Steve might have time for a quick drink at lunchtime in that new bar. Steve; Martini man like Joel. Joel; pale blue shirt man like Steve.

*You smell nice, without a shower,* Jess said, nuzzling into his neck. *Love you.*

She was about to say, *Just think, this'll be the last time you make love as a single man.*

But Joel had already turned away in foetal position. Jess, her mind buzzing, didn't push it.

The last thing she thought about before getting to sleep around 2am was

the flurry of texts that had been coming and going since her hen's night. Texts she'd been careful to delete. All except one.

*Love you,* she said, in a whisper, barely audible.

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**ALEX MCKEOWN**

*qu'est-ce que c'est qu'un sonnet?*

a sonnetling

who never

grew

to see the fruits

of sonnethood

never soared

from its tree

its wings were cut

before its lines

were said

as others

descend

my sansonnet

is dead

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**DEREK MOTION**

## birds poem

gonna write about the intricate fridge alarm melody

a gentle tonal cascade but still persistent

maybe also talk about flirting with people on facebook msgr

all bad ideas should be stared down right

i can't name all of the trees like the better writers

i also cloak my explicit sex writing in allusion tho

that's more common / i get easily bored with looking at things

but look just look at my observations: i've encountered three irish accents

so far in 'the tropics' + so many trees that should be named

maybe you could always just cut mood with surroundings, feel

*real* things in reverse? maybe that shadow, an abandoned train

stop imprint on your roof, a freak accident of the lamp's angle poise

or maybe the spider web gulag around your back shed

or some bed sheets as curtains & a poster for a film

no-one else loves keep each real thing numbered

oh see the poem's title was originally to be:

*the girls i've really fallen for who wore glasses like,*

*really needed them to see*

& see it would itself have fallen & fallen naturally into three stanzas, each with a

different pace, a different line-fade:

deliberate messy finally open-ended

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three of you & none of you with a father i can picture

soo all three *are* Luke Perry, the at-time-of-writing

Luke Perry... i feel like he now has the acting skills to pull the role off

he is, furrowing his brow as he considers optometrist expenses

listed on a paper bill, then raising his eyes over the paper

bill to consider this new boyfriend on the threshold

i mean he is unimpressed yet steeled & ready

a blue denim shirt

there is just the song of birds instead

um birds i can't name

& several volumes of poetry on rec

we are perhaps only the latest cartoon adaptation

not faithful to the source text but ugh the millenium is getting

boring i can't *feel* anything so throw on my jughead crown

plan an abrupt ending affect a jaunt

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**JAN NAPIER**

## **Kennels The Black Dog**

On a day so grey that shadows vanish,  
bare trees own the boniness of scarecrows,  
a raven the only bird braving rain  
slithering like blood down glass,  
a dark Akubra droops upon a hook,  
your drizabone *drip dripping* upon boards  
already stained by storms and other fallings.  
Daylight cobwebbed and dim leaks  
into the quiet room where numbers blighted  
as the wheat slumps to a red ending,  
and I, blank as that profit column  
slot a cartridge into the carbine.  
Sure hands wrest intent aside and dumb  
with almost, you hush me against bones  
strong as instinct, as trusted. Harboured  
next to your heartbeat breathing is easier.  
Summer seeps through flannelette. There is a bluing  
of sky loud as a shout, that kennels the black dog.

**DAMEN O'BRIEN**



## Catching the Last Wave

New Year's Eve and she will not come in from the water.

The jetty burns with fireworks

and the water is soup

slapping her surfboard with a hungry smile.

She rises over the back of a clean-toothed break

and dissolves in the ocean.

Her wet suit is a dark teardrop in the darkness.

The New Year hurtles at her like a punch

and there's no gainsaying it.

What more can be done with the waves?

They are lining up all the way

past the persuasion of horizon.

All that can be done is find the right one

and tame it to the beach.

According to the papers

there is a credible risk of a terrorist attack tonight.

It may have already happened

where the rest of the universe begins,

crawling, slick and gulping through the sand.

Also tonight: 30 Million Dollars could be won  
in the Lottery;  
the last person ever to write a sonnet  
or sing an aria  
or remember television  
could be pinking and wailing a first breath.  
The sky thunders. The surf thunders.  
Each *annus horribilis* and all the perfect years  
are lining up over the horizon for someone.  
In the ornamental sky, the little lights.  
There are cheering children.  
It's New Year. She is not coming in from the water.

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**MARK O'FLYNN**

***(Missing)(The)(Point)***

Begin with a verb – Begin.

Or else an adjective say – Green.

Perhaps an adverb will set the tone – Slowly the green.

Or a common noun on its lonesome – Grass.

Or the definite article – The green grass.

At this stage forget about alliteration

just tell us what does the green grass do? Grow.

So – article, adjective, noun, adverb, verb.

The green grass slowly grows.

So many possibilities.

Of course a conjunction will allow you to continue

should you wish, to whatever collateral damage

lies hidden in the grass.

Article (The) adjective (green) common

noun (grass) adverb (slowly) verb (grows)

concealing (gerund continuous aspect) the (article)

bodies of the air crash victims (subordinate clause)

the famine acres (noun phrase)

spreading like fire (simile) across the grasslands.

See (imperative) that lone child (synecdoche)

asleep among the bones.

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**NATHANAEL O'REILLY**

***(Un)belonging***

Twenty years ago I returned

from the northern to the southern

hemisphere for the first time

after two and a half years away,  
escaped from a London winter  
with snow on the ground  
to a searing Melbourne summer.

I rode the bus to Canberra  
to renew a distance-damaged  
friendship. We drove north  
from the bush capital to Bathurst.

Along the way I introduced  
her to The Tragically Hip –  
*Road Apples* and *Phantom Power* –  
she gave me the gift of *Grace*.

We traversed drought-browned land,  
through Gundaroo, Gunning and Gurrundah,  
stopped to swim somewhere unnamed.

After Europe, the distance between towns  
seemed immense, the land a nothingness,  
my Anglo-Celtic skin foreign and ridiculous.

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Taking turns driving, attempting reintegration,  
I wondered if I could ever belong

again after so much time and distance.

In Bathurst, I took turns on the waterslide  
at the public pool with the freckled local  
kids, swam laps while she sat in the shade,  
rolled joints beside the back fence, smoked  
behind gum trees. That evening, she joined  
her choir performing Handel's *Messiah*  
in a local church. I sat stoned in the gallery –  
the closest to heaven I'd been in years.

We ditched the godbotherers  
after the concert and drove down  
to the Macquarie where we rolled  
our own, talked into the early hours,  
diminished the distance between  
us, and finally drifted into dreams  
beside the whispering river.

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**LIAM PERRY**

***Fool's Gold #1***

The fold-out mattress is a bitch tonight,  
Sheets spilling over the side –

I'm awake,  
Stiff in the dark,  
And nothing sings on Baylis anymore,  
And the silence stones me,  
And I reach for a soul,  
And she rolls over,  
This is it.  
Wasted in the summer,  
Work by the morning,  
Left to spoil by the night,  
Writing pretty letters backwards in the bus window,  
Feeling shitty when she doesn't see them,  
Sixteen and blue,  
Grabbing all that glitters.

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**ANDREW PURCHES**

## Individual Cities

Like a lung, the city expands;  
inflates within a burning  
night to capture a world. It  
encompasses streets, lights and  
windows leaking life. It takes  
the entire earth within itself,  
and swells to become the  
universe as the breath stretches  
its skin to a maximum.

Then the air is expelled, and  
the world deflates. It  
collapses with release and  
diminishes itself; becomes  
now a view from a balcony;  
becomes a house; becomes  
the contents of a room.

The city reduces itself until  
it transforms into a box that  
holds a curled-up body; shrinks

down to something singular  
that imprisons.

The city is a world that  
defines itself through  
boundaries.

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**CAROLINE REID**



## the kid

ravishing in frost and a tinkle of jewels

the kid sings at night

it makes her feel less like a tweet

more like a blue-tongued skink slipping over pinballs

or a transvestite gallivanting

in a stew of possible

she sings for hops

in a razzle-dazzle-black-money club

where the layout of gin rushes

like bored thoughts through blood

she sings:

*Jelly bounces high when it's raspberry wet –*

she pauses. like lightning.

a hung whaler moon plaits its diacritical crown.

the kid owns all the parties of tomorrow

and tomorrow and tomorrow

and yet she dreams of being space-bound

in some delicate steel monster

serenading stars

shredding ice hearts into milk

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**GRAHAM ROWLANDS**

## Absolutely

When up & coming screen actor Keira Knightley was pleased to declare she was an *absolute cunt* it would have been incumbent on her fans to plead the bottle or some other mode of self-medication although there must have been one or two sisters who recalled the early years of Women's Liberation concluding that, no matter how resolute & forthright Ms Knightley was surely making a late run for it. Even so, the times being the times & nothing but some golden vowels from one of the trendiest of the trendy unbelieving gentlemen of the cloth couldn't have been dismissed in their entirety – that emphasis on the *Absolute* in *absolute cunt* providing a holy & blessed ascension into a realm once widely believed to be Heaven.

115

Rajith Savanadasa

TO KEEP PACE

So this is it, thought George Saranapala. The future; he was in the middle of it.

Once a great tract of land full of small cottages – the homes of at least a hundred respectable denizens – bulldozed and built on. Stone foundations and steel struts overlaid with concrete and tinted-glass until a giant arm reached to the sky, a millionaire’s helicopter resting in its palm.

It was a faceless giant. Signs didn’t mar the façade of the hospital. At least George couldn’t see any when he entered. All he knew was that it was cold. Cold in the foyer, cold in the elevator, cold in the corridors. Now, in his private room on the seventeenth floor, cold air hummed through a vent near the ceiling. The bed was smaller than what he was used to. Sheets were tucked in tight and he couldn’t sleep in its straightjacket hold. George rose from his bed, pulled his sarong down over his creaking knees and made his way to the window.

Below him, the city huddled in tropical warmth, large parts of it covered in the old-fashioned garment of darkness. George focused on the newer parts, the parts that revealed themselves in a halogen glow. Past the clay tiled roofs of the middle-income single-story villas, past the squat government flats, through the swaying coconut trees, over the Dutch-built canal worming around and under

roadways, past the hull of the abandoned spinning and weaving mill – that was as far as he could see. He tried to make out the thrust of his gable, the pitch of his own roof but he could not. The sleeping metropolis had inhaled the burnt orange of his tiles and the dove grey of his walls. Even his extra-strength glasses couldn’t magnify and atomise his house, separate what was his from the blur of everyone else’s.

He thought of how his wife, Shamini, would be asleep in her room. She

would be supine, snoring softly on that hard mattress on her single-bed. It

suited her brittle spine. Her once long, lustrous mane now just a slick around her shoulders. How her girth had grown over the years, in inverse proportion to hair. He saw her lying like this when he had walked in to talk about Andrew or to retrieve newspapers or the Time magazine from her room. That belly and those breasts, once firm and sculpted, now shapeless and puddled around her

frame. George had not expected this. His vision of the future had not included an ageing wife.

As sex began to lose its allure, George decreed that sleeping alone in the

master bedroom while Shamini took the guest room was best, not just for him but for the whole household. It kept arguments to a minimum, his marriage alive and his home unbroken.

Shamini was something of a fusspot. A few hours ago at the hospital reception she had created an unholy row, crying and hissing at hospital staff saying, “I’m not going anywhere. I’m staying with my husband.”

Fortunately the staff did not back down. “Madame, there is nowhere for you to sleep. We will be monitoring Mister Saranapala all night. If there is anything, we’ll call you.”

And George, desperate for evening of peace and quiet said, “Just bloody go, otherwise I’ll lose consciousness again.”

Shamini called as soon as she got home. “Hi, Georgie? How are you? Are you all right? Are you lonely?”

“I’m fine, woman. I’m not—” His voice faltered when all he saw around him were spotless surfaces, white walls, shiny metallic counters and cupboard-space. “I’m all right,” was all he managed.

Her second call came when it was time for him to take his pills.

“George. Make sure you take your Miconazole, Timolol...” She read out the whole list of vitamins, laxatives, nitrates, beta-blockers, lipid-lowering pills and antiplatelet pills – all the multi-coloured capsules that kept him alive since his bypass.

“I’m not even supposed to drink water before the operation, you idiot!

Don’t you remember what the doctor said?

“Ah. Yes, Georgie, I forgot. I’m sorry.”

“I’m going to sleep now, okay? Don’t wake me up.”

\*

George pulled up a chair. It wasn’t as comfortable as the old suede armchair in his room. It didn’t envelop his body and let him sink into its cushions, instead, the polyvinyl lounge supported and pushed against his weight. George adjusted his centre of gravity until he sat awkwardly upright but not altogether uncomfortable.

He was hungry. He wished he could have a glass of scotch to warm his

bones. There were many nights George indulged in an extra drink or two,

sometimes waking up at an ungodly hour just for another taste. The ritual of drink was the last magic left in his life. A new bottle of Chivas impregnating his room with its aroma, blocks of ice sliding delicately into the glass, soda fizzing and releasing carbonated pebbles against his tongue, the light from his bedside table refracting through the amber liquid – these were his religious observances, his spiritual rites.

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Unlike his wife, George was not a strict Catholic. He went along with her to church every Sunday but did not sing the hymns or listen to the sermon. His mind wandered to the consulting work he was doing for the moribund Ceylon

Planters Association, to the drink he was due to have with an old friend or

colleague, to the tennis being played at the SLTA, Cathedral Club, or overseas at Wimbledon or the French Open. George considered himself less a man of

science than a man of economy. He wasn’t sure if it was a God, Allah or Yahweh out there but he knew there was something and wasn’t in a hurry to find out.

George’s son, Andrew had completely rejected religion. Although this did

not faze George, he realised it was indicative of how far his son had drifted.

Andrew's orbit was so strange, so unconventional that George couldn't calculate or predict his movements. When viewed from afar, Andrew was a foreign body and the prints on his surface that George could claim to be his own were few and fast disappearing.

"Andrew, drink your milk, putha. You won't grow tall if you don't," was something George had repeated throughout Andrew's childhood. He fed

Andrew the right amount of Protein, cut out the fat and sugar. He took Andrew to the park on weekends, created an exercise regimen that focused on stretching his son's pudgy body. But the boy was a glutton. He secretly gobbled chocolates, ice creams and pastries that Shamini smuggled into his room. Andrew was lazy.

Aged ten, he ran the weekly kilometre half-heartedly, dropped off the bar when George wasn't looking, counting the chin-ups with exaggerated effort while his feet were on the ground. When George caught Andrew cheating he didn't reprimand him. He took him aside and quietly told him one of his future stories.

"Look here, putha, in the future everyone is going to be at least six-feet tall. So you better bloody well do those chin-ups. You don't want to be called a shorty, do you?"

The bedtime stories George told were invariably of a science fiction bent.

He was an avid reader of Arthur C. Clarke and Phillip K. Dick and his favourite TV show was Beyond 2000. Andrew would curl up in his pyjamas; place his cheek on George's lap. George absently stroked the silky head before realising he was coddling the boy and moved Andrew's head gently aside.

"Okay, I'll tell you one story and you go to sleep. In the future cars won't be running on the road. They'll be flying cars."

"Really? Will everyone have a flying car?"

"Yes. You will definitely have one. There will be a landing pad on our roof."

George now thought of the rich man's helicopter on the roof of the hospital.

It was the tycoons and moguls who owned the future. The stories that he told his son, the ones about living till one hundred and twenty, self-regenerative 118

tissue, cybernetic organs and robotic servants – the rich had them all. George wanted to go up to that landing pad and wrest back his dream. But he couldn't even climb a flight of stairs.

Leaning heavily on the armrest, George got to his feet. He shuffled into the bathroom where a tube light buzzed. He sat on the toilet. Toilets that shot shit out to space. That was another story he had told Andrew. All his tales were

of feats of engineering, of marvels of science so that Andrew would aspire to create these things, make his mark on history and perhaps dedicate something to George.

But when the time came, Andrew refused to study science or engineering.

He chose graphic design.

“What the bloody hell is that?” George had said when Andrew first introduced the idea.

“Making websites or doing 3D models and things, Thaththi. Who knows, I might get to work for Pixar,” said Andrew.

“Pixar? What the hell is a Pixar?”

“It's a movie studio that specialises in animation. Computer-generated stuff. Cartoons.”

“You think I put my blood, sweat and tears into making you a bloody cartoonist? Study something useful like law or medicine, you bloody donkey.”

But Andrew was stubborn. He flew away to Australia to complete his



Bachelor's Degree in Multimedia and became employed as a web designer for a new-fangled marketing firm.

George's phone conversations with Andrew grew stilted and tended to keep to the weather and Roger Federer. According to Shamini, Andrew made good money. Apparently he had a nice car and a nice apartment in a peaceful suburb in Melbourne.

George also gathered that Andrew had a girlfriend. Shamini claimed to know nothing about that. George hoped the girl was one those attractive Australians. Blonde. Bronzed. He hoped Andrew enjoyed it while it lasted.

Soon he would find him a good Sri Lankan girl, a classy, obedient high-caste Catholic to make his wife. A spouse who would age well.

Andrew's cousin Soniya, who "Skyped" with him daily, was the one who let it slip. "I spoke to him, Uncle. He's having a good time. Seems very happy now that he's settled..." Soniya had paused and tried to backtrack, "I mean, settled into his job."

George knew what that meant. He was approaching eighty, yet he was sharp enough to recognise apprehension and make inferences of Soniya's mutterings. He heard the same hesitancy when she inadvertently let them know  
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her marriage was falling apart.

"Gavin and me? We're doing well. Most of the time ... there are times when it's difficult but that's how every relationship is, no Uncle? What do you say, Auntie? I'm sure both of you have had tough times."

George and Shamini looked at each other and quickly looked away.

“Would you like a cup of tea, darling?” If there was something Shamini was good at, it was diverting a conversation to shallower waters.

A week later Soniya had announced she was divorcing Gavin. Now she was carrying on with another fellow – a cricketer, a lowly Buddhist from down South. George didn’t know what the world was coming to. People didn’t know how to stay together anymore.

He flushed the toilet and washed his hands thoroughly, soaping twice to exterminate the germs. He looked in the mirror and didn’t like what he saw.

\*

The greatest human feat of the modern age was not an elevator to the moon. It was not something you could point at and say, “There it is. Isn’t it awe inspiring?”

No. It was something that just hung in the ether as invisible and inexplicable as ectoplasm. At least they could have communicated through mental projections amplified by cybernetics like in Asimovian fictions. But they didn’t and George despaired. He sometimes watched with a particular distaste, how young men and women flailed around and became entangled in the eerie ‘Interwebs’, squawked at plastic mouthpieces, gaped at small screens held in their hands. How they typed their messages in acronyms and abbreviated nonsense. To George, who had filled up a phone book of the Who’s Who of the Colombo upper-middle-class over a lifetime of persistence and diplomacy, hearing how modern teenagers gained over three hundred contacts in an instant was blasphemy.

Last December Andrew had a new computer delivered to George and

Shamini’s as a Christmas present. It didn’t come with a user manual and George had to explore and experiment to learn how to operate it. With a little help from Soniya, he was soon two-finger-typing official letters on Word, playing Hearts

and scrawling infantile pictures on Paint. He called Sri Lanka Telecom and signed up for an Internet connection. Soniya showed him Facebook. She

created an 'account' for him, 'friended' herself and Andrew on his behalf and even took his photograph with her mobile phone, hoisted his mug onto his

"profile". George, who always enjoyed seeing his photo in the papers, couldn't hide his pleasure.

He browsed photo albums and updated statuses. He sent daily messages to

Andrew and Soniya. He even made contact with a couple of old school mates.

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But it didn't last. Soniya, who took to using her uncle's computer whenever she visited, must have changed something; George wasn't sure what, but

whatever it was upset the equilibrium of his world. George started seeing curious things on Andrew's Facebook. There were rainbow coloured pictures saying 'All We Need is Love,' or 'Colouring Outside the Lines.' Pink triangles proclaimed,

'Fix Marriage Not Gays.' There was a photo of Andrew in a sleeveless top and sunglasses, his arm draped around a topless young man's shoulders. George

clicked and pushed at keys furiously but the windows that revealed these

revolting images refused to close. He poked at the power button but his shaking finger missed repeatedly and finally, in his desperation, George pulled out the cord from the wall-socket. He never plugged it in again.

If Facebook was telling a truth, it was not a truth George could agree with, not a truth he wanted to know. It was much later that he realised the things he called Truth and Lies were extinct. The new world was full of uncertainties, indeterminacies and cats in boxes suspended between life and death. Where was the clearly defined future he was promised? He could have wrapped his aching limbs and his concrete will around it and dragged it into his quarter. He could have summoned every kilo of his diminishing weight and pushed it past the

door and locked it out forever.

Lord knows George tried. He thought it best to avoid speaking to Andrew: he began making excuses and becoming scarce whenever the phone rang. He refused to let his son's voice enter his ears and infect his mind, until two weeks ago when taking a walk, his energy drained, the world became watery and he lost balance and fell backwards onto concrete pavement, back to a time when he heard little Andrew's voice in his ear whispering, "Thaththi, when is it going to be the future?"

\*

George turned the buzzing tube-light off and returned to the window.

The earliest birds were tracing arcs through the still-dark sky. A couple of matchbox buses sped across miniature streets. A prayer from a mosque rose in the distance. The early broadcasts were beginning. Soon the airwaves would

be thick as rush-hour traffic. George was forced to think about these waves.

Doctors had told him that after the procedure, he would have to be wary of radio frequencies. Of magnetic resonance and airborne electronic pulses, they could interfere with the device. George had picked it up when the doctor

showed him the sample. It had a shiny face like the reverse of a watch, the

diameter of a two-rupee coin, not much thicker or heavier than a five. It was far more costly than any money he had ever folded into his wallet. He didn't 121

even have it in savings. He couldn't afford it so he said "no, thank you. I'll be all right." But Shamini didn't listen. She called Andrew who promptly wired

the money to her bank account. They colluded to buy another computer.

They said this one would save his life.

Yesterday Andrew phoned, wanting to speak to George to wish him luck

but he told Shamini, “I’m feeling tired. I’ll talk to him tomorrow, when it’s over.”

\*

When they knock on the door George is still looking out the window. The nurse helps him into the hospital gown. Even though he feels all right to walk, they place him on a stretcher and wheel him out. The doctor, a certified cardiologist and electrophysiologist, follows. Out into the cold corridor. Into the cold

elevator. Through to the cold catheterization theatre. George begins a silent prayer. Soon he will be subjected to tests. Aside from the usual blood pressure and pulse checks, there will be the electrocardiogram. After they find his vitals to be normal, George’s chest will be shaved and scrubbed down with antibacterial soap. He will take off his wedding ring and hand it over to the nurse. Hooked up to a drip he will receive intravenous antibiotic and a mild sedative. Local anaesthetic will be injected. A small incision under the collarbone. Using a fluoroscopy as his map of George, the doctor will run wires through a vein

leading to the heart. Using the same incision, he will plant the device under the skin and connect the wires. Once the wires are in place the doctor will test the connections to ensure electricity flows. If all goes well it will become part of George. It will provide the occasional jolt to his heart, to remind it to keep a steady beat. A pacemaker. To keep pace with the headlong rush of the world.

And maybe when he feels better he’ll call Andrew and talk to him.

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Steven Sharman

THE KILL

**We** slip away early. The campsite fades quickly from sight as the car winds its way up the mountain. The sealed road ends and we crunch along on

the gravel. Grey-blue shadows lighten and soon we are driving in sunshine. Dad is in his element, window down, scent of trees, car gently climbing, nothing and no one about. I feel slightly sick from driving on an empty stomach, yet excited

at the thought of what lies ahead.

The drive up the mountain takes half an hour – but seems much longer. We pull into a side road and begin winding our way down a dim, narrow, forestry track. The old car bumps along and we bump with it. Dad negotiates the pitted track, sometimes swerving from side to side to match the curvings of the trail.

An opening appears in the dense bush up ahead and sunlight explodes across the windscreen. Dad guides the lunging car into a car-space-sized gap and we halt. He grins,

“Enjoy the ride?”

The clearing is littered with dead wood. Dad has set four traps amongst the timber, each marked by a small red flag. He asks if I can spot them. I scan the clearing and don't see anything like a red flag. But then – as the breeze lifts – a flash of scarlet dances near a dull log, a tiny ribbon fluttering on a slim, metallic prop. Having found the first flag, I quickly find the rest, clustered at the centre of the clearing where the timber refuse is piled for burning.

“Keep away from there,” he warns. The .22 is in his hand. He pulls back the bolt to expose an empty chamber.

“Never carry a loaded gun.” Thick, work hardened fingers feel in a top pocket and produce a shell. “It's time you learned to handle a gun.” Thick, callused fingers load the shell, close the bolt, *Click-click*. “But your mother doesn't ever need to know ... understand?” The dark eyes, half shaded by his cap, pinpoint accurate, interrogate me.

“Sure,” I reply, fixated on the gun.

“Never point a loaded gun at anyone, and keep your finger off the trigger until you're ready to shoot. Got it?”

“Yep.”

“A gun’s *not* a toy. You can kill someone with it – anyone, yourself included ... You got that?”

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“Yeah, I understand.” Dad grunts – unconvinced? Fits the gun to his shoulder.

“Aim slightly above the target ...” He concentrates on the opposite side of the clearing. *POP!* The gun fires – woodchips fly up from a distant log – a rabbit darts out and races to another log about ten metres farther on. Dad

reloads, kicks the dirt at his feet, dislodging a decent sized rock. “Pick it up.” I pick up the rock; dry, brittle flakes of sand fall away.

“You know the log the rabbit went to ground behind?” He asks – eyes on the log.

“Yeah,” I point “the one with the twisted root standing up.”

“That’s the one. You reckon you can hit it with that rock?”

The tree trunk is about twenty-five metres away. I’ve spent most of my life up to that point, throwing rocks at things. “Sure.”

“Go ahead.” He puts the gun to his shoulder, “But once you throw, stay still – right. Don’t move ...”

“Uh-huh.” I take aim and throw. The rock sails smoothly through the clearing and hits the fallen tree dead-on *Thunk!* The rabbit darts out and leaps for space. *POP!* The rifle snaps and the rabbit side-steps – then flops and tries to regain its stride – but the world is slowing down. Dad has hit it!

He walks over to the struggling rabbit. I follow him silently, solemnly. The

rabbit shuffles in the black dirt. Its grey-brown fur trembling with shock and fear. It tries to right itself – to stand – escape, but there’s no way ... He kneels by the rabbit – takes it gently in his hands. The rabbit blinks as he raises it up.

Fingers close around the rabbit’s throat – *Crunch!* The rabbit’s neck is broken – the bleeding hind leg twitches. I watch – fascinated – horrified ...

Dad looks at me. “You think you could do that?” I look – and look – at the rabbit and then – at him. “I think so ...” He goes on watching me a moment.

He never looked at me so long in my life.

“If you eat what you kill, boy, there’s no harm in it. Understand?” I think I do. I want to. I nod. We turn toward the car. In the boot Dad keeps a battered esky. He places the rabbit inside, explaining he will ‘gut’ it back at camp, dice and pulp the offal to use as ‘burly’ for when we go fishing. He’ll skin the rabbit too and keep the pelt.

No waste.

The morning heat intensifies. We erect folding chairs in the shade. Dad pours tea from a heavy thermos and we eat the plain sandwiches he made earlier in the half-dark of the campsite. The silence in the clearing is absolute. After ‘smoko’ we collect firewood and check the traps – their fierce teeth so placid – concealed in the deadwood. But none has been tripped, so we leave them and head back to the car. Dad looks over at me and asks if I’m ready to try the rifle. I hesitate.

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“It’s all right,” he says, “when I was your age we hunted for food, not sport.

It was different. Take your time – if you need to.”

“I’d like to try ...” My nerves swirl furiously. I grip the fear, try to choke it with invisible hands. Dad retrieves the rifle from the boot, takes it from its brown vinyl carry-case. Though he knows it is empty he inspects the chamber

before handing me the rifle.



“Get a feel for it. Just handle it a while. Try putting it to your shoulder – sight the weapon. Tuck it in snugly – to absorb the kick when it fires. Hold it close – don’t hold it away.”

I understand what he’s getting at. I rest the stock in the curve of my shoulder and it feels right. I raise the barrel and aim along its length at the log Dad hit earlier – rest my finger against the trigger – squeeze ... It’s stiffer, more inert than expected.

“A little harder ...” I squeeze harder – *Snap!* The action clicks emptily, thrillingly. I lower the gun. “Try and relax a bit.” Dad suggests, “You’re a bit tense.”

*I sure am!*

“Have another go with the chamber empty and then we’ll try a *live* round.

You’re doing fine.” The .22 isn’t a large gun but it feels big in my hands. I like its sleek simplicity: stock, grip, barrel, trigger, bolt – *Snap!* The motion is smoother.

I feel steadier.

I open the chamber and Dad holds out the round. I like the way he leaves it to me. The small, hard shell is cold and slick in sweaty fingers. I insert it carefully and close the bolt. *Click-click!* The distance between myself and the log is now greater. My only goal – to hit the log – any part of it. I sight along the barrel at the centre of the log, lift slightly higher.

Fire – *CRACK!*

Up close the report is louder and almost makes me jump. I absorb the slight recoil easily in the meat of my shoulder. There is a whiff of smoke in the air about my head. My mind races in every direction at once – tastes the atmosphere, the temperature. A cacophony of emotions ripple through my

body, wild as a rapid river. Above all, I sense my shoes in the dirt, planted on the spot – digging in and digging out. A splatter of woodchips fly up from the log. I've hit it!

Dad's voice – surprisingly close – “Good shot!” After what feels like an hour he takes the gun from me. I grin stupidly and he returns my grin. “Feels good, doesn't it?” I nod.

“That's enough for today.” He says. “Time we got back. Your mother is going visiting this afternoon and you'd better go with her.”

I walk numbly to the car and get numbly in. For the rest of the day I am

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numb. Everyone comments on how quiet I am. Mum studies me thoughtfully.

I hardly notice.

\*

When we arrive back at the camp it's around 6pm and Dad is off fishing. In the esky I find the rabbit 'dressed' and lying neatly in ice. My younger brother's eyes goggle as he peers in the esky. “What's that!?”

“It's the rabbit Dad shot this morning.” I inform him, coolly.

“Yeah?!”

“Yeah. I saw ... He hit it on the run!”

Tommy stares at the pink-blue body in the esky. “What's he got it in there for?”

“I think he's gonna cook it.” I explain.

“What for? You mean – Dad's gonna cook it – *for us ... to eat?!?*”

“Yeah. But you probably won’t get any ...”

“Why not?!” He elbows me in the side and pushes closer.

“You’re just a kid.” The phrase hangs in the air – solid as a wall or moat. “I was there when he shot it.”

Tommy looks at me, perplexed, unsure whether to laugh or cry.

“Anyway, Dad’ll probably cook it later and you’ll be asleep already ...”

“So will you!” He shoves harder with his bony, little elbows.

It’s a waste of time trying to explain, so I keep quiet. But I know Dad will let me stay up tonight. He plans to go fishing again after dinner and I’m going with him.

\*

Mum uses the gas camp-stove to cook hamburgers. I have just the one, as I am saving room for later. She makes no comment. Dad returns as we are finishing.

He has a trout and smiles as I come up to him.

“Dad, can I still come fishing later?”

“Sure you can mate.” His hard, dark features as relaxed as I’ve ever seen them. “See this beauty?”

“Yeah. That’s a whopper!”

“Sure is.” Dad puts the fish in the esky and takes a seat by the fire. Mum asks if he wants a burger and he says he doesn’t. He’ll make the rabbit stew soon ... I gaze at Tommy and smile knowingly. Tommy sticks his tongue out, but I just keep smiling. Mum glances at me once or twice without saying anything.

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“Time for bed,” Mum announces and Tommy moans routinely. Dad coughs, “Bill’s coming fishing, love. Okay?” She frowns slightly, but nods.

Tommy starts to protest and Mum hushes him.

“Your brother is old enough to stay up a little longer. Now, go and brush your teeth!” Tommy obeys, but throws an outraged glance my way.

I look at the fire. A thousand flares crackle on the ground before my eyes and I feel something like that inside. Dad shifts in his seat. The night circles us with stars and my heart blazes in the darkness.

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Dorothy Simmons

IN YOUR FACE

She slid down against the door of the flat and buried her face in her arms.

Well. She’d know not to run that way again. It was clearly where the local hoons hung out. She shook her head: shitshitshit! The trails, the bike paths, what use were they if you couldn’t run and cycle them whenever you wanted?

Why else had they moved? A dog: she needed a dog. If she’d had Paddy loping alongside, it would never have happened. But Paddy was dead. She groaned, pushed herself to her feet, let herself in.

A drink of water. Another, another.

In the bathroom mirror, a blotched and dirty face winced at her. Gingerly, she traced the reddened skin of her cheek. She pulled her T shirt away from

her fast bruising shoulder and winced again. Thank Christ it was Friday. That would be why, of course: weekend coming, late afternoon. She never usually

went running after work. But she'd walked into the flat, looked at the cases and boxes still waiting to be unpacked, and changed straight into her running gear. Slowly, she rotated her arm. It worked, though painfully. At least it was her left arm. Ice: she should ice it.

Sitting in the kitchen with an icepack clamped to her shoulder, her lips

twitched. They might have been on ice. Not just the cities, was it?

They'd come from nowhere. One minute, the flash of a fairy wren; the

next, them. Three of them, side by side, barring the track. One bleached blond, one ginger. The third also ginger: little brother. Learning. Bleach burly, with a sizeable gut; Ginger long and lanky. She swerved right: Bleach. She swerved left: Ginger. The boy just stood there, arms dangling. She put her hands on her hips and glared.

"Let me past, please."

"Let me past, please."

Synchronized, like she'd pressed a button. Left, right; right, left. Right

right, left left. Bloody hell: she dived past the boy, tripped, fell. Hard on her shoulder.

High fives. They clapped the boy on the back.

Clutching her shoulder, she heaved herself to her knees. Bleach loomed,

thumbs belt hooked, pelvis thrust forward. Ginger leering, wagging his tongue.

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OK. Get up. That's the first thing. Get up. Eyes flicking from one to the other, biting her lip, she staggered up.

"No!"

But she was rammed against the burly chest, the studded belt. Sour breath: pizza, garlic. His hand squeezing her bum. She jerked her head back and spat. It slimed his cheek. He punched her face. She reeled, he yanked. Somewhere, shouting.

“Look out, cyclists! Cyclists coming!” “What the fuck?” Momentarily slackened grip: enough. She twisted, ducked, bolted. They lunged, but too late. At the bend in the track, she cut up towards the road.

\*

Shower on full, she closed her eyes, letting the hot water stream away the tension, ease the ache of her shoulder. Just badly bruised, she thought. Hoped.

Jack would be home soon, he'd check. Or was he going to go for a drink? Call him: soon as she got out of the shower. What about the police, call them? But what were they going to do? Six of an evening, a Friday: and she'd got away, hadn't she? She was all right, wasn't she? Thanks to those cyclists ...

She should have stopped. Why hadn't she stopped? They'd have ... what?

Citizen arrest? The law in lycra? Had to have caught them first ... but she'd have been safe. Had them to back up her report. Not much to report without her.

She shook her head and turned off the taps. Too late now.

It must have been the boy who yelled. Little mongrel.

OK. Jack's on his way. Sit down; calm down. She stared at her phone,

then up at the photo of Paddy on the wall, his goofy doggy grin. What now?

Dogs, she could start looking for dogs online. Rescue dogs, ha ha! Her thumb hovered, but then she flipped the phone down beside her. Don't be silly.

Nothing to do. Think. Just think it through. This was the first real glitch.

Otherwise, so far so good. Move, school: so very good. Ann Tyler was great;

made all the difference to have a good Head of Department. And Jack liked

the other physios, liked his rooms, liked being able to bike to work. So. Just bad luck; could have happened anywhere. Nothing compared with the good

... the straight amazing really ... luck of the two of them scoring jobs in the

same regional city. City! That was a laugh. Give it a year, their friends all said: this time next Christmas, they'd be back.

Last Christmas: Cape Otway. Running from their campsite to the

lighthouse, the high white lighthouse. Her phone in its pouch, imagining the view, the pictures, off in her own little world. Then the snarl, the escalating snarl. She glanced over her shoulder: motorbikes. She flinched as two gleaming 129

black machines hurtled past, burning up the last kilometre to the lighthouse.

Big black headlines, CCTV close ups of heavy boots, faceless helmets: poorly lit pavements, abandoned cars, impenetrable bush either side of an empty

highway: Hells Angels, Black Uhlans, Bandidos. Keep going, she told herself.

Don't be stupid.

Seconds later, she turned back.

She regretted it, of course. At the campsite, the radio was reporting dolphin sightings. A whole pod, evidently, had been sighted: playing, just playing. There were dozens of photographs on Facebook already. But not hers. Stupid, stupid!

She'd have had the best view, angle, light, everything! The bikies probably knew, that was probably why they were in such a hurry, they were after pictures too.

Probably perfectly nice people.

When was she ever going to learn?

Now, she picked up her sketchbook and started to draw.

\*

“Right, Jen. Year 9.” Ann Tyler raised weary eyebrows. “Single period, last thing.

Lousy timetabling: not enough time for a real practical, and they won’t feel like theory. Decent enough kids, just not at their best last on Monday. You want something straightforward.”

Jen nodded. “Thought I’d just do straight life drawing. Selfies, I call it.

Only of each other. Do some step by step sketches on the whiteboard for them to follow. It works, I’ve done it before. I put them in a pile at the end, go through, see if they can pick who’s who. Helps me get to know them as well.”

“Yes, well, lay down the law first. No picking on each other. No pinning the tail on the donkey, as it were. Or I’ll do it. When I’m introducing you.”

Jen was standing behind Ann when year 9 came tumbling into the Art

Room. A ginger head. Couldn’t be: yes it could. The boy. He hadn’t seen her yet, too busy wrestling with his mates. She turned her back and stared at the wall.

What to do? Depends what he does. It must have been him that yelled;

doing look out for his big mates. If she’d only waited for those damn cyclists!

That was the first thing Jack said when she told him.

“I know, I know. Just panicked. Sorry. “

“Why didn’t you call me first? We could have gone together.”

“But I like running on my own.”

Involuntarily, her hand went to her shoulder; it was still really sore. OK.



You've got to get through the class. If he acts up, send him out. Don't try to deal with it now. Just do the lesson you planned. You're their teacher, remember?

With any luck, he'll lay low; won't be game without his mates. OK. Deep breath.

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"And this is Ms Stewart."

She turned and smiled at the inquisitive faces.

"We are fortunate to have found such a very well qualified Art teacher at such short notice. I believe you have actually had an exhibition in Sydney, haven't you, Ms Stewart?"

"Just a small one: a Paddington gallery. With a few others: drawings, mainly."

"Excellent. See how fortunate you are, Year 9? Make the most of it; let her see what you can do. I'll be most interested to see how you go. No messing around, is that clear, Josh?"

The boy shrugged and nodded.

Josh: OK. Sitting down the back: of course. She'd seen the shock of recognition in his eyes, seen the hand raking through the ginger hair. Don't look at him, focus on the rest.

"Good. Well. I'll leave you to it. Ms Stewart, any problems, send Lucy or Tania to me. I'll be in the staffroom, girls."

She left. Jen looked around the room. Tania ... or was it Lucy? No, Tania ... put her hand up.

“Did you really have an exhibition, Miss? Like, in an actual gallery? In Sydney? Is that where you’re from, Miss?”

“Yes, it is. And yes, I did. A group of us got together and drew pictures of each other. Like selfies, you know, only of other people. And that, Year 9, is what we’re going to do this period. Selfies of each other. I want you to sort yourself into pairs, then get paper, drawing boards, pencils. Five minutes and you should be sitting opposite your partner, ready to start.”

Chairs scraped, bodies shuffled and bumped, voices rose and fell. Five minutes. They were seated, more or less. Waiting.

“But Miss?”

“Yes, Lucy?”

“What if you can’t draw faces? Like, we’re not artists like you, Miss. This is too hard.”

Chorused agreement. Jen raised calming hands. “Of course you can’t. That’s what you’re here for, isn’t it? To find out how. It’s not as hard as you think. Look here.” She turned the whiteboard around to show the drawings she’d prepared: the oval first empty, then divided, then with eyes, nose, mouth, hair. “See? Get the eye line, nose line, first? Take your time and really look. Try measuring with your pencil, so; that’s how you get the proportions ...”

The boy sat slouched in his seat, arms crossed, feet stuck out.

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“No partner, Josh?”

Headshake.

“OK. Tell you what: you draw me and I’ll draw you.”

Eye flash, sudden snarl. “As if!”

Carefully, she set board, paper and pencils on the table in front of him.

She pulled her sketchbook out of her bag and set it on top. She opened at the sketches of Bleach and Ginger. He sat up sharply.

“As if what, Josh?”

Tight lipped, he muttered something.

“What’s that, Josh?”

He shook his head. “Nothing, Miss.”

She removed the sketchbook. “Well talk about this later, OK? But for now, start drawing.”

He picked up a pencil.

Ten minutes later Ann Tyler put her head around the door. Her face registered surprise; the room was quiet. Absorbed. Catching Jen’s eye, she mimed a hand clap and came in. She walked over to Josh. He threw himself forward, covering his drawing board.

“What are you doing, Josh? I want to see.”

He shook his head clear.

“What’s wrong? Sit back, for goodness sake. Don’t be silly.”

He sat back. Ann Tyler nodded slowly, smiling as Jen came up. “Not bad.

Not bad at all. Wouldn’t you say, Ms. Stewart?”

He hadn’t just drawn Jen’s face. He’d drawn her bending over a student,

pencil in hand, demonstrating. One hand was raised to her shoulder; the pencil lines were thick and awkward, blacker than the rest.

“I would. Definitely.”

“Trying to impress the new teacher, eh? That’s the way. Good lad. Right,

Ms Stewart, I’ll leave you to it. See you in the staffroom. “

The bell rang. The room cleared.

“Miss?”

She swung round. He stood, arms dangling, looking his question.

“Josh. OK. But not now. We need to make a proper time. “

“Did you do me? You didn’t, did you?”

She shook her head. “You saw. Too busy with the others. Didn’t even get started.”

His shoulders slackened; she realised that he had been holding his breath.

He pointed at her sketchbook. “You gonna show them to the police?”

She nodded.

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He looked down, twisting his long knobby fingers. “What was I supposed to do, Miss?”

She opened her sketchbook. In silence, they looked at the two faces.

Josh cleared his throat. “Me and Ginge. Not that much alike, are we? Apart from the hair.”

“You’re kidding. Sticks out a mile; anybody would know you were brothers.”

He pulled at a finger; the knuckle cracked. She winced and turned on him.

“What were you doing there in the first place? Do you always hang out with them? Is that how you want to be? What would have happened if those cyclists hadn’t just happened along? You could have been an accessory ...”

“What cyclists?”

“The ones you yelled out about.”

Josh shook his head. “Weren’t none, Miss. I just yelled the first thing come into my head. Kev half killed me. But by then you were out of there.”

She stared at him. Bullshit; absolute bullshit. Did he really think she was that stupid?

“Cause there could’ve been, see. Cyclists come along that long windy stretch all the time, we’ve had run-ins with them before. Whole packs of them, just ripping along. Mow you down soon as look at you.

He paused. “Jeez, you can run, Miss!”

She closed her sketchbook and stared at him. Think. Think. No, don’t. Remember. Remember what nearly happened. Just report the little mongrel and get rid of him.

“Reckon I’m bullshitting, don’t you?”

Pale, peaky face, daggy, hand-me-down uniform, long knobbly fingers: ginger hair. He fidgeted, then lifted his chin defiantly. “See

enough, Miss?”

She didn't react.

He shrugged. “Same as, same as. Don't matter if I done it or not.”

She snapped. “Oh: you never done nothin', I suppose! Don't give me that, I saw you grinning. Big laugh, ha ha ha!”

He hesitated. “At first I did, yeah. Fair enough. But I thought they'd let you past, see. Thought they was just mucking around like they do.”

Cyclists, just ripping along; they'd have caught up with her for sure. Before the bend, even, before she left the track. He grabbed her sketchbook.

“Give me that!” She lunged, but he was gone, skipping backwards.

Stupid, stupid! He'll tear them out, of course he will, shred them. Then out that door and down the street ... Paddy, my last drawing of Paddy's

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in there ...

He stood poised, half way to the door. Don't move, he'll bolt ...

His eyes flicking between her and the sketchbook, he turned the pages slowly, deliberately. “This your dog, Miss?”

“Yes. If he'd been running with me none of this would have happened.”

“So why wasn't he?”

“He’s dead.”

A glance, a nod.

“Reckon it’d be good to have a dog.”

“Give it back. Take your damn mates if you must, but give me Paddy.”

Ann Tyler would be wondering where she was. She’d come looking; she should keep him talking. Tell him he’s got talent ...

He slapped the sketchbook shut, flipped it on to the nearest table. At the door, he paused.

“OK, Miss. Whatever. Do whatever you like. You will anyway. Can’t say I blame you, really. But you’re lucky I was there, all the same. Just bloody lucky.”

He slammed the door behind him.

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**ALI JANE SMITH**

***Christmastime!***

Walking to yoga through  
the decorated mall  
snowmen big as ogres  
trees, trees bauble-laden trees.  
Santa’s grotto is a plastic tent  
but inside it’s magical

Bing Crosby and David  
Bowie oughta  
wheel in a baby grand.  
Upstairs to the studio  
a Christastimey name  
for a room above a shop.  
A hole in the ceiling  
shows corrugated iron  
and the flicker  
of a whirly-whirly sucking  
warm air from the roof cavity  
into the sky above my little city.  
Every standing asana  
feels like I'm impersonating  
reindeer. What would life be like  
with antlers? Not  
an original question.

It was asked and answered

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in *I Wish That I Had Duck Feet*.

by Theodor Geisel



writing as Theo LeSieg  
who is Dr Seuss, not to be  
confused with Dr Spock  
who is not Mr Spock.

The boy in *I Wish That I Had  
Duck Feet* soon learns it's best  
to just be yourself  
a philosophy I've long held  
though I'm still learning  
the practical applications  
and lately I've learned too  
that self you're better-off being  
is now and then an imaginary reindeer  
that needn't chew reindeer moss, reindeer  
moss being, not moss, but lichen  
and in dwindling supply.

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**BARNABY SMITH**

## **Docklands**

On a first visit to Dublin  
the East Wall Road drags you  
along with the winter sun. Man  
at the traffic lights with his  
family: he was at the film last  
night, the film whose spirit  
we are quietly clinging to. His  
daughter's hair, made up of angles,  
adjusts as she sways with her  
father's cigarette smoke. She and I  
are getting to know the puddles,  
both improvisers in terrain. She and  
I are taking it seriously.

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**IAN C. SMITH**

## Mixed Fruit

I hold time in memory with these scenes, sounds, words.

A sadist slams on my old door, hears no reply from me.

Unafraid in a misfit's clothes that no longer fit

I cross a rail yard, bluestone screenings, see

pigeons on the tiles, a line-up murmuring Who's guilty?

A perspective of power poles march into the future

piloting a freed boy into the rest of his story,

betrayal, bad beginnings, sad wasted days, behind.

On foot I home in on a girl who writes letters of love,

a litany of words aching on creased paper, as good

as breathing this petrol-redolent movie-scene morning.

Embarrassed by a haircut I buy fruit watched as if

I were an escapee, true from my fresh point of view

lingering among abundance, colours and scents,

until sidelong glances propel me on my quest.

A steeped throb, dewdrop of longing, adazzle. Young.

Slow, silvery, I walk, a grace of swans, sky, gods,

impatient with worrying about death in the distance,

weathered, weighted by a clamorous past,

from the pits of freedom denied to wind on my face.

I would claw back up time's frozen chute, burst free  
to oxygen-packed inklings, horizons, today and tomorrow.

I breathe in a banana from a bowl of mixed fruit,  
words on paper, young hearts crying, miles of road ahead.

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Rob Walker

TOMMY RUFF

At the Sand Bar an uneasy clam fell upon the dyslexic crowd. It was Tommy Ruff. Wearing a leatherjacket. He drifted over to the bar. He was a groper, a womaniser with the arms of an octopus. An invertebrate drinker with scalloping consumption from years of smoking too many cod. Molluscing any female who came under the gaze of his scaly eyes. Too shellfish to see beyond himself. The females, seduced by his firm mussels said he was 'just a nautilus little boy', never suspecting for a moment that he was, in fact, a bivalve.

And there she was, Anne Chovy, the Girl With The Limpet Eyes. *Look what the tide washed in* she said through serrated teeth and a long cigarette holder. A curl of cigarette smoke rococoed up like a thin Art Nouveau strand of seaweed as she curled her upper lip. Undeterred he purred *Want a good time, my little bonito?* Unmoved she sneered *how would you like a sockeye?* He was floundering now. *Climb down off ya perch, flathead* she carped sharkastically. *What, are you hard of herring?*

*You know you want me so bad* he angled, koily. *You have no sole, snook* she added, but gudgeonly allowed him to glide her onto the seafloor in a conger.

Tommy was hooked but Anne didn't take the bait. He was a groper once too often. She landed him on the deck and now he's under the filleting knife of

the sturgeon.

It pays to know your plaice ...

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Biff Ward

TO THE WEST

Frank's cheek cracked on the gutter. He heard it and felt the warm ooze of blood. He settled in, his cheek snug against the concrete, his mind

swooping down into blackness. His neck let go and he fell still further in to a dark, delicious nothingness.

"C'arn, get up, you fucker!" A boot was kicking his foot, his calf, a thigh.

He clawed at air, reaching for something to hold. The grit of the gutter under his fingertips.

"C'arn. Jackson."

Someone hoisted the back of his shirt. He heard it rip. An arm slipped round his shoulder and hauled itself against his windpipe. He jerked sideways.

"You filthy fucker! Get in there," as he was hurled against metal, heard the door slam, an engine roar. When they chucked him in the cell, he crawled to

the torn PVC hanging off some foam rubber and fell back into the blackness.

"Nothing else," he muttered as it closed over him.

They kept him in a second night – drunk and disorderly, somesuch crap –

and gave him a shower and a feed. They even threw him a clean t-shirt, yellow with What Are You Looking At? in olive green letters on the front.

He was let out at the same time as Mannie, his mate from the walkabout

trip two years before. “Just do what the ol’ fells say,” Mannie always said and he’d done that even when he was mad for the grog.

Mannie’s bare feet, Frank’s torn runners with no laces, they walked as one, straight to the mob in the trees where the booze was. They long-grassed there until money and grog were all gone.

\*

The afternoon before pension day he found himself, dry-mouthed and head-thumping, back in the hostel. Old Dick, sitting out the front on a plastic striped chair spoke around his ciggie. “Ya wanted a boat?”

“Yeah,” said Frank, his dream of dissolving out on the water rushing back to claim him, just him and waves and the rocking and the wind. To be gone from all this with the clouds or the stars above, an eyeful.

“Well, there’s a bloke at Cooper’s reckons he could talk to ya.”

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“Right. Cooper’s.”

He thumbed a lift – a young idiot in a pea-green ute – and walked round the back of the fibro shack with its crooked doors.

Fat old Cooper was sat there by his fire with a skinny bloke, two front teeth missing and an open smile. Jock.

“S’how’s it goin’?” he put out his hand to Ray.

“Y’got a boat?” his voice came out croaky.

“Yeah,” the skinny guy jerked his head towards the dark behind the fire and Cooper’s mounds of rubbish.

“In the morning,” said Cooper, “No rush.”

It was hard to drink beers slowly, to talk in between or sit in silence, rather than his usual style – drink until you blew up or collapsed. A boat, though.

It was worth trying here. It seemed that this Jock liked to tell stories that he wanted you to laugh at. They were mostly against himself, the stupid things he’d done. He’s an idiot, Frank said to himself, but he laughed more or less when Jock wanted it.

When Cooper and Jock went into the shack, Frank lay on a pile of old canvas. He watched the sky, stars coming and going through hot heavy air. He imagined the boat holding him, felt the rocking that could see him out. Ever since that day in Phuoc Tuy province, he’d been wanting to die. Twenty-five years. It was long enough.

In the morning, Jock led him along a path between houses, kid’s broken tricycles, mounds of dirt, a couple of burnt-out cars. They came out onto an unpaved street and crossed to a well-kept house on stilts.

“It’s m’cousin’s,” said Jock, swinging his eyes to the house. “They let me use the yard.”

Round the corner of the house, they came to the boat, chipped and pock-marked, but a sturdy hull. A mast lay on the ground.

“Needs work,” Frank was walking around it.

“Heard you’re handy,” said Jock.

“Whadd’ya want for it?”

“Few hundred bucks. Five?”

“Can I work on it here?”

“Yeah. They’re away a lot,” Jock gestured around him.

Frank had had work painting on and off. It worked for him, turning up with no tools and the job easy. He went back to a contractor he knew where they were finishing some flats. The second time he got paid, he found Mannie and went blind for five days. They call it a bender but for Frank it felt like a straight line – he did not deviate from the goal to keep drinking. He didn't end up in gaol, so he went back to the job but blew up at the tiler who fancied himself too much.

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He screamed at him, “You stupid arsehole! You don't know what you're fucken doing!”

He smashed the ladder against a door, he threw brushes. People ran away from him.

\*

It took two years like that, painting and drinking, paying for the boat, getting into fights. Most of the holes in the yacht were patched when yet another job went bad. Mannie was out of town so Frank drank his final money away with

someone he'd had a fight with years before. When the police came, he sprinted through scrub to a beach, scrambled around rocks and came to a quiet cove.

Bent over, grabbing for air, his heart stilled slowly until he could hear both the pounding in his ears and the scratching of water breaking across shingle. He straightened bit by bit, like an old man, he thought, and his eyes met the sea, the view from this angle reaching across the hopping navy-blue water to the sky.

“All the way,” he whispered to himself.

It was so clear and simple that he laughed. He could go now. God would

take care of him. A bloke had given him a mainsail that was thin and torn in places; that was, in fact, pretty useless but it should get him out of the bay. The other sails weren't much better. He waited until dusk and made his way to the



boat at the back of Cooper's. He threw the sails in, some oars, coils of rope, a drum of water. At the last minute, he put a compass and a road map of Australia into a drawer in the tiny cabin.

"I've gotta go, Coop," he said to his friend. "Can y'give us a lift?"

"Sure, matey. First thing."

Cooper stared into the fire, another tropical white Buddha, a stillness about him that was incomprehensible to Frank. They slept either side of the embers.

When the sun lolled liquid gold on the horizon, they eased the boat onto

Coop's trailer. Trundling through the suburbs, Frank said, Stop here, as they neared a supermarket catering for the early morning boozers. He bought some

bread, some ropey cheese and a packet of grey-looking salami. As he reached the counter, he tossed three wrinkled mangoes into his bag.

He knew it wasn't much but he loved the idea of forty days in the wilderness, the certainty that God would be with him, God would know what to do. Here

there were too many people – he hated them – and yet all the time he felt alone – and he hated that too.

Out there, on the sea, he might feel pure again. He thought of it as wanting to die – he was going to sail to oblivion. Yet still he was beseeching God – he was no longer sure what for. All he knew was that he had to go.

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\*

Cooper waved him off and he set his face to the open sea. As the wind picked up, the boat was leaking and the sails were tearing.

He sailed across the bay bailing water, going easy on the mainsail so that

the flapping didn't rip it right in two. Then he turned westward into the Timor Sea. He bailed, he drifted, ate very little.

Sometimes he could feel God around him, other times he felt alone. One night, he found himself shouting at God, “Now’s the time. Come and fix me, you bastard!”

On the fourth day, he cut some ply from the wall of the cabin and covered the last two holes where water was getting in. Caulked them. “Stay dry, y’fuckers” he muttered.

On the sixth day, he ate the last of the bread, winding crusts together to make it seem bigger than it was.

Then the sea changed. A new current? He didn’t know where he was, knew shit about the sea really. They were the biggest waves he’d ever been in, though. The sail was tearing, water coming in. He was on the edge, staring like an idiot. Then suddenly, the old calm came to him, the one where he felt like an ice-making machine, where he was cold and hard. That place he discovered after the shooting. He couldn’t always find it but sometimes it came to him and he loved it. No one could get him then. He could push everything away when he found that.

God was taking him somewhere. He just had to wait.

He was blown way out to sea and then the wind faded. The boat bobbed about.

It felt as though there was all this black stuff in his head that no one could fix. He was hoping – no, believing – that God would pull the shit out of his head and fill it with good stuff. Days passed. He saw land in sight one night and realized he’d floated into a nice harbour. In the morning he went on deck and there was

only water, no land at all.

At times he flew like a bird and then he'd fall, all the harder from being so high, to feeling hopeless. He hated that more than anything. He'd start screaming and smashing things, yelling. One time he was shrieking at God, "Piss off and stop fucking around with me. If you had the guts to show yourself, I'd kick you to death!"

Then he fell on the deck half-laughing, half-crying.

For sixteen days, there was no land, no food. For the last three days he had no water. He liked the hallucinations. He was used to them because of the mushrooms he'd eaten over the years. He spent a lot of time lying down. When  
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he got up he'd spin out and faint, so he learnt to sit up first, wait a while and then stand up, hanging on to something.

Once he saw a man and his wife sitting in the cosy lounge room of their house reading stories to their young children. They were all clean and had eaten a nice evening meal. He thought, "Why the hell couldn't I have had a life like that? Why am I stuck out here? Why is the arse falling out of everything?"

\*

Eventually he let go, sank into the blackness, his head against the bulwark. The boat could float wherever it wanted to – or sink. This was it – one way or the other, Frank Johnson was going to die. No more bailing.

The sun had just come up – he could tell by the golden-red sheets on his eyelids. He'd just thought, "Another fucken day," when he heard scraping and the boat jolted.

Then he heard voices. Faces leaning in. Someone running for water.

Cockatoo Island. They reckoned he'd floated over a thousand k's. Three men and a woman. Some kind of hippy prospectors or something. Frank didn't care, didn't want to know them. He just wanted to be back on the boat.

The woman said, "You're so thin that even your toes are skinny." She meant it kindly but he growled. Didn't want to be there, didn't want her hands poking at him.

They fed him for a few days. After two nights, he slept well.

But when he insisted that he was going back out to sea, they shrugged. The woman and her bloke gave him some supplies. He was grateful for the food but didn't care what they thought. He knew where he wanted to be, what he was doing. The bloody island had interrupted his mission, that was all.

When they waved like crazy people, he couldn't wave back, couldn't give them what they wanted. He turned his back to the shore.

When the land fell away and it was just him and the sea again, he stood at the bow. He could feel God there. "This is it, you bastard," he said. "This is your chance. I'm ready."

After a day, Frank felt the western current pick him up again. The boat kept moving even as he did nothing to help. The black crap was zooming in and out of his head, God coming and going so he didn't know if he was on his own or not, but the night sky held him steady, steady enough.

On they sailed, Frank and his boat to the west.

Yet each day, he found himself looking for the sunset, the sarongs of gold on the water. They meant the night was coming. Then he could get lost in those spaces between the stars.

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**LES WICKS**

## The Mad Book

He always said he was a bit eleccentric  
so full of instancy  
anyday he circled back to my small orbits.

When we talked it was like  
the exploding chair –  
one's weight activates the device,  
a trigger engages when you rise.

So you sit in agony  
afraid to move, your buttocks cramp,  
the sweat runs. You become riverine.

Like the pauper's coat,  
can't afford to lose it,  
always on but  
the heat & itches you must shed,  
you must move but

he has discovered adventure capitalism,  
odd hooting noises from his internal backing band  
makes any argument feel orchestral  
while simultaneously a dissonance.

No time for trees, he'd

mow the planet.

This must be like some lovers' gale

or the switch to repression – those detention camps

make innate sense if you sit outside

the possibility of contemplation.

Lives can turn

& burn.

But I just smoulder

beneath his muscular nonsense.

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**GAIL WILLEMS**

*Woman Holding Roses Standing Between Two Springs*

## Lethe

Illness / a dark web / woven / slithers over bones / stagnated memory / an army  
of minutes seconds / cut sideways / unravels ghost petals / long silences /  
absences / no compromises //

she hears his voice / roses cringe / shiver / once pruned / slashed / blood fixed //

thorns / hands with a thousand cuts / bleed needled words // a faint drop shadow  
of red / a husk of air stained



## **Mnemosyne**

Perfume of roses / crawls around in her mind / scars hold stories / crushed petals  
bruised /

holding warmth // a spinning of sun / twist of ocean / a twang of light / clouds  
shaken / shattered silver lines like ice / the horizon draws her eyes / no sense of  
hurry // plants her feet sifts the past / echoes old love / old fragrances // found  
woman / holding roses / watches him buried in a fold of stem // shadows slip /  
ride west / untangle / a tip of foam / distant murmurs below / far below

(Lethe- wellspring of Forgetfulness

Mnemosyne-wellspring of Remembrance)

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**JENA WOODHOUSE**

## **Wild Geese Migrating**

*Hawthornden, Scotland*

The geese rise skyward with the early  
sunrays on their breasts and pinions;  
urgent cries, as ragged cohorts  
wheel above the stooks and stubble,  
golden wheat fields shimmering  
like Viking women's braids.

The Greylags form their chevrons, call  
their bearings, warnings, and farewells  
to pastures of their summering,  
then set out for the southern skies,  
each skein an extended wing, flexible,  
articulate, synchronising pace and altitude,  
maintaining echelons, settling to steady,  
pulsing rhythms for the epic flight.

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**MARK YOUNG**

## **or part thereof**

The bulldozer's working is  
a bass line, impossible to  
escape, a reverb under  
every corner of the city—  
the blossoming cherry  
trees, an open door some-  
where, a table sitting on  
the empty feet of a pigmy  
rhinoceros, the shop of a  
busy Burmese silversmith.

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**ROBYNE YOUNG**

## Afternoon Tea

### Silently they lie haloed-hallowed

black against starched white sheets

waiting to grant saintliness

to those who choose them.

Plucked from their mothers' cradled arms

the laws of nature neutralised

their cries crescendoed.

Silently they lie hallowed-haloed

sensing their fate to be feted

unswaddled then dressed

white lace layered ready

to be brought out to afternoon tea

along with the best china and

dainty cakes.

Note: on viewing Destiny Deacon's work *Adoption*, 1993/2000. Light jet print from Polaroid original showing tiny black baby dolls encased in white patty (cupcake) papers on a tray.

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Biographies

**Ivy Alvarez**'s second poetry collection is *Disturbance* (Seren, 2013). She is also

the author of several shorter collections, including *Hollywood Starlet* (Chicago: dancing girl press, 2015) and *The Everyday English Dictionary* (London: Paekakariki Press, 2016). A recipient of writing fellowships from MacDowell Colony, Hawthornden Castle and Fundación Valparaíso, her work appears in journals and anthologies in many countries and online, with selected poems translated into Russian, Spanish, Japanese and Korean. She lives in New Zealand. [www.ivyvalvarez.com](http://www.ivyvalvarez.com)

**Sofiul Azam** has three poetry collections *Impasse* (2003), *In Love with a Gorgon* (2010), *Safe under Water* (2014) and edited *Short Stories of Selim Morshed* (2009). His poems are published in *Prairie Schooner*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *The Journal*, *Orbis*, *The Cannon's Mouth*, *Postcolonial Text*, etc. and anthologized in *Journeys*, *Caught in the Net*, *Poets Against War*, *Poetry for Charity Volume 2*. He teaches English at Victoria University of Bangladesh.

**Christopher Barnes** lives in Newcastle, UK, and won a Northern Arts Writers Award in 1998. 2005 saw the publication of his collection *Lovebites*, Chanticleer Press. Christopher worked on a collaborative art and literature project called *How Gay Are Your Genes*, facilitated by poet Lisa Mathews, and exhibited at The Hatton Galley, Newcastle University before touring the country and abroad. In May 2006 Christopher had a solo art/poetry exhibition at The People's Theatre, Newcastle, UK. He is also an Art Critic for *Peel* and *Combustus* magazines.

**Robert Beveridge** makes noise ([xterminal.bandcamp.com](http://xterminal.bandcamp.com)) and writes poetry just outside Cleveland, OH. He has had recent or upcoming appearances in

*Pink Litter*, *The Ignatian*, and *YuGen*, amongst others.

**Craig Billingham's** stories have appeared most recently in *Southerly*, *Tincture*, *LinQ*, and *Verity La*. A collection of poems, *Public Transport*, was published in 2017. He lives in Katoomba, in the Blue Mountains, NSW.

**Julie Briggs** lives in Narrandera, writes poetry and an occasional short story.

She enjoys collaboration with visual artists. Her work has been published in journals, and various spaces and places.

**Erwin Cabucos** is a teacher of English in Queensland. His collections of short stories are about growing up Filipino and life as a migrant in Australia. Originally from the Philippines, Erwin now lives in Brisbane.  
erwincabucos@gmail.com

**Joan Cahill's** poetry has been published previously in *fourW*, in anthologies including *Short and Twisted*, as well as *FAWQ Brio 2016*. In 2012, she won the Melbourne Poets' Union Urban Realism Award, followed in 2013 by First Prize in FAW North Shore's Regional's Vibrant Verse Poetry Competition. She considers that her first collection of poetry, *Buddha's Left Foot*, is almost a memoir.

**Chloë Callistemon** is a photographer, filmmaker and writer. Her poetry and multimedia have been published in journals and anthologies including *Cordite*, *Rabbit*, *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Australian Love Poems* and *Contemporary Australian Feminist Poetry*. She is a PhD candidate at Griffith University, Queensland.

**John Carey** is a Sydney poet, ex-teacher of French and Latin and a former part-time actor. He has been published in *Best Australian Poems 2011*, *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Island*, *Meanjin*, *Quadrant* and *Southerly*, among others. John has participated in three readings at the Sydney Writers Festival. He is the author of four collections, the latest is, *One Lip Smacking* (Picaro Press, 2013) **Carol Chandler** is an award-winning author who has been published in some of Australia's most highly regarded literary magazines. Her short story collection *Anonymous Caller* was awarded first commended for best first book in the IP

Picks Awards. Her psychological thriller, *Black Mountain*, was shortlisted in the *Seizure Viva la Novella IV* competition and was published this year by Ginninderra Press. She has received the award of Writing Fellow from the

Fellowship of Australian Writers and co-edited *Written in Sand*, a community poetry and visual arts project.

**Sue Clennell's** poetry has been published in *The Weekend Australian*, *Best Australian Poems 2011*, and *Australian Love Poems*. She has twice been a

runner up in the Josephine Ulrick Poetry Prize, and three of her ten-minute plays have been performed in Sydney and Canberra's Short & Sweet Festival.

**Lucy Coughran**, from Lake Cargelligo in rural central NSW, is studying literature at Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga. After completing her Bachelor of Arts, she plans to study teaching so that she can force teenagers to love the English language as much as she does. She also plans to visit every Disneyland in the world, travel all over Australia, and to own as many dogs as possible.

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**Michael Crane** has had many poems and stories published in Australian newspapers and journals including *Overland*, *Meanjin*, *fourW*, *Southerly*, *Best Australian Poems* 2011, 2014 and 2015 and *Australian Love Poems*. Michael organised Poetry Idol for the Melbourne Writers Festival 2007 to 2012. He was managing editor of the *Paradise Anthology* from 2006 to 2013. In 2016/2017 he was unit manager for *Into The Limelight*, a film project of short humorous films featuring people dealing with a mental illness.

**Louise D'Arcy** has had many short stories published in magazines and anthologies in Australia and overseas.

**Sally Denshire** is an occasional poet and one of the Albury writers bringing you local stories at *Riparian*. <https://riparianalbury.com>. Her autoethnographic PhD from the University of Technology, Sydney was on the 2010 Chancellor's

List. She is on the advisory committee for the *Write Around the Murray* (WAM) festival and the committee for the Members of Murray Art Museum Albury

(MoMAMA). She is an adjunct lecturer in the School of Community Health, Charles Sturt University.

**Michel Dignand** writes fiction full time. His first collection of stories *She Knows How to Look After Herself* was published by Wistman Publishing in 2014. His second collection, *Small Change*, was launched in August 2016. He's currently working on his third collection, *Accidents Speak Louder than Words*, which is due to be published, again by Wistman Publishing, early in 2018.

**Tug Dumbly** has performed his poems, songs and monologues on radio (as a regular on both Triple J and ABC 702), in schools, and at venues and festivals both in Australia and abroad. He has released two spoken word CDs through the ABC, twice won the Banjo Paterson Prize for comic verse, three times won the *Nimbin World Performance Poetry Cup*, including this year's cup (2017) and in 2015 was runner up in the Josephine Ulrick Poetry Prize .

**Claire Feild** was born and grew up in Yazoo City, Mississippi, the town where the hills meet the Mississippi Delta. Her first poetry book is *Mississippi Delta Women in Prism* (NewSouth Books, Alabama). Her second collection of poetry is titled *Southern Aunts: The 1950s* (Tillandsia Press). Her third collection of poems is *Indigo Blues* ( The Origami Poetry Project). Claire's creative nonfiction book is titled *A Delta Vigil: Yazoo City, Mississippi, the 1950s* was published in July 2014. Her most recent creative nonfiction book is *Mississippi Delta Memories* (Solomon & George 2016). Claire's poetry has been published in numerous print literary journals in many countries.

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**Adam Fieled** is an American poet based in Philadelphia. His books include *Posit* (Dusie Press, 2007), *Beams* (Blazevox, 2007), *When You Bit...* (Otoliths, 2008), *Apparition Poems* (Blazevox, 2010), and *Cheltenham* (Blazevox, 2012).

His latest chap is *Cheltenham Elegies/Keats' Odal Cycle* (Gyan Books, 2015). A magna cum laude graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, he also holds an MFA from New England College and an MA from Temple University, where he taught for many years.

**David Gilbey** is Adjunct Senior Lecturer in English, Charles Sturt University and President of Wagga Wagga Writers Writers. David's two collections of poems are *Death and the Motorway* (2008, Interactive Publications) and *Pachinko Sunset* (2016, Island Press).

**Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois** has had over twelve-hundred of his poems and fictions appear in literary magazines in the U.S. and abroad, including



*fourW*. He has been nominated for numerous prizes. His novel, *Two-Headed Dog*, based on his work as a clinical psychologist in a state hospital, is available for Kindle and Nook, or as a print edition. To see more of his work, google *Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois*. He lives in Denver.

**Jonathan Greenhouse** is the winner of the 2017 *Prism Review Poetry Contest* and a finalist in the 2017 *Pinch Literary Award in Poetry*. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Antithesis*, *The Believer*, *Going Down Swinging*, *LitMag*, *The Malahat Review*, *Rattle*, *RHINO*, *The Rialto*, and *Subtropics*, among others. His second chapbook, *Secret Traits of Everyday Things*, was a finalist in last year's Annual Chapbook Contest from Encircle Publications and will be published this September.

**Rory Harris** teaches at the Christian Brothers College, South Australia. His most recent collection is *beach* (2016).

**Elanna Herbert** has lived in Canberra, Gundaroo, Perth and is now on the NSW South Coast. Her poetry has appeared in journals, anthologies and online and won commendations in competitions. She was the winner of the NFAW Marion Eldridge Award in 2002 and runner up of the ACT Writing and Publishing Awards 2006 for her short story collection *Frieda & the Cops* (Ginninderra Press, 2005). She has a PhD in Communication, published as *Neohistorical Fiction and Hannah's Place: a creative response to colonial representation*.

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**Matt Hetherington** is a writer, music-maker, and moderate self-promoter based in northern New South Wales. He has been writing poetry for over 30 years, and has published four poetry collections and over 300 poems. His first all-haiku/senryu collection *For Instance* was published in March 2015 by Mulla Mulla Press. [www.mullamullapress.com](http://www.mullamullapress.com)

**Ross Jackson** lives in Perth. He has had poetry published in many Australian literary journals and websites. Some of his work has been published overseas.

**Jill Jones** has published ten books of poetry, including *The Beautiful Anxiety*, which won the Victorian Premier's Prize for Poetry in 2015, and *Breaking the Days*, shortlisted for the 2017 Kenneth Slessor Prize. Her latest book, *Brink*, was published July 2017.

**Christopher (Kit) Kelen** is a well-known Australian poet and painter based at the University of Macau, in south China, where he has taught Creative Writing and Literature for the last seventeen years. Kelen has published a number of scholarly volumes about poetry and the most recent of his own fourteen poetry books are *Scavengers' Season* and *A Pocket Kit*. Translated volumes of Kelen's poetry have been published in French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Swedish, Chinese, Filipino and Indonesian. Kelen is well known for his own work as a

translator and anthologist. His most recent painting and poetry exhibition was *up through branches*, held at the SNBA Gallery in Lisbon in June-July 2017.

**Maryanne Khan** has lived in Europe, the United States and Australia. She has published short stories, articles, poetry and museum education material in the US and here. Her first novel *Walking to Karachi* received a 2009 Varuna Harper-Collins Award. Her collection of short stories *The Domain of the Lower Air* was published in the US in 2011. Her work appeared in the exhibition and book

*Picture 1,000 Words* in 2013. In 2015, Maryanne won the Booranga Prize for her short story published in *fourW twenty-six*. She lives in Sawtell, on the north coast of NSW.

**Zohab Khan** was writer-in-residence at Booranga in 2017. Since 2006, he has been building an impressive career in spoken-word poetry, culminating in taking out the title Australian Poetry Slam Champion in 2014. Zohab is also

the co-founder of The Pakistan Poetry Slam. In 2017 Zohab has released his first book in Japanese and *I Write*, his second collection of poetry in English.

[www.zohabzee.com](http://www.zohabzee.com)

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**Daniel King**, also known as David King, is a same-sex oriented Roman Catholic who lives in Western Australia. His hobbies include surfing, reading the latest

space exploration news, and playing the computer game *No Man's Sky*. Poems and stories of his have appeared in various publications around the world, his stories most often in *fourW*.

**Vanessa Kirkpatrick's** first collection, *To Catch the Light*, won the inaugural John Knight Memorial Poetry Manuscript Prize and was Commended for the

Anne Elder Award (2013). Her second collection, *The Conversation of Trees*, was published by Hope Street Press (2017). Vanessa's poetry has been broadcast on national radio. She lives in the Blue Mountains.

**Andy Kissane** lives in Bardwell Park and has published a novel, a book of short stories, *The Swarm*, and four books of poetry. *Radiance* (Puncher & Wattmann, 2014) was shortlisted for the Victorian and Western Australian Premier's Prizes for Poetry and the Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature. He is currently

working on a verse novel and a short story cycle. [andykissane.com](http://andykissane.com)

**Mran-Maree Laing** is an award-winning Sydney poet, essayist and fiction writer. Her work has been published in *Meanjin*, *Cordite*, *PAN* magazine, and other journals. She was awarded the Mick Dark Flagship Fellowship for her short story manuscript and was published in *Best Australian Poems 2015*.

**Gary Langford** is the author of 38 books, including fifteen fiction titles, four textbooks and fifteen poetry titles including *The Sonnets of Gary Langford*, 2016.

His last dozen books use his paintings as illustrations, including the cover of *Memoir of a Teacher Writer*, 2017 and his latest story collection, *The Writer Who Becomes a Best Seller*, 2017. Gary is a writer painter in Melbourne, Australia and Christchurch, New Zealand.

**Wes Lee** lives in Paekakariki. Her latest collection *Body, Remember* was launched in September 2017 by Eyewear Publishing in London as part of the Lorgnette

Series of pamphlets. Her poems have appeared in *Westerly*, *Cordite*, *Poetry New Zealand*, *The University of Canberra Vice Chancellor's Poetry Prize Anthology*, and many other journals and anthologies. She was the recipient of the BNZ

Katherine Mansfield Literary Award, and has won a number of awards for her writing.

**Alison Lesley** lives in Perth, Western Australia, and is currently studying Literary and Cultural Studies and Creative Writing. If she can silence the internal editor long enough, she aims to be a novelist in the future.

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**Rosanna Licari** is an Australian poet and writer. Her work has recently been published in *Not Very Quiet Journal*, *Island*, *foam:e*, *Small Packages*, *Tincture*, The Disappearing Project (The Red Room), *Eratio* (USA), *Shearsman* (UK) and *Softblow* 12th Anniversary anthology (Singapore). She is the poetry editor of online journal *StylusIt*.

**Natalya Lowndes** is the pen name of the art historian Sarah Symmons. Her first novel, *Chekago*, (Hodder and Stoughton 1988) became an international best seller. Since then she has published three further novels and short stories in anthologies and journals including *The Frogmore Papers*, *Willesden Herald New Short Stories 4*, *Iota Fiction*, *The Grist Anthology of New Writing*, and *fourW*.

Her story in *fourW* twenty-six 'Making the Heart Dance' was read at ISBN, the eastern England literary festival, in June 2017.

**Julie Maclean** is the author of *Lips that Did* (dancing girl press, US, 2017), *To Have To Follow* (Indigo Dreams, 2016), *Kiss of the Viking* (Poetry Salzburg, 2014) and *When I saw Jimi*, (Indigo Dreams, 2013). Her poetry appears in *The Best Australian Poetry* (UQP). [www.juliemacleanwriter.com](http://www.juliemacleanwriter.com)

**Alex McKeown** is a Tasmanian poet and translator. His work has appeared in *Southerly*, *Island*, and *Snorkel* among others.

**Derek Motion** is a writer based in Narrandera. His collection of poetry *The Only White Landscape* was published by Cordite Books in March 2017. Online presence at [typingspace.com](http://typingspace.com)

**Jan Napier** lives by the Indian Ocean. Her first poetry collection *Thylacine* was launched in 2015 and her work has been published in journals and anthologies, both in Australia and overseas.

**Damen O'Brien** is a Queensland poet. He has recently won or been shortlisted in poetry competitions including the Peter Porter Poetry Prize, the Yeats Poetry Prize and the Ros Spencer Poetry Prize. His poetry has appeared in a number of Australian journals.

**Mark O'Flynn's** most recent collection of poems is *Shared Breath*, (Hope Street Press, 2017). He has published a collection of short stories as well as four novels.

His latest *The Last Days of Ava Langdon* (2016) was shortlisted for the 2017 Miles Franklin Award.

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**Nathanael O'Reilly** is an Australian who resides in Texas. His poems have appeared in journals and anthologies in nine countries, including *Antipodes*, *Australian Love Poems*, *Cordite*, *fourW*, *Glasgow Review of Books*, *LiNQ*, *Mascara*, *Postcolonial Text*, *Snorkel*, *Tincture*, *Transnational Literature* and *Verity La*. He is the author of *Preparations for Departure* (UWAP Poetry, 2017), *Distance* (Picaro Press, 2014; Ginninderra Press, 2015) and the chapbooks *Cult* (Ginninderra Press, 2016), *Suburban Exile* (Picaro Press, 2011) and *Symptoms of Homesickness* (Picaro Press, 2010). He was writer-in-residence at Booranga Writers' Centre in May 2017.

**Liam Perry** is a 16 year old school student. Though primarily a songwriter, his first publication was the poem #3 in the February 2017 edition of *Spineout!*

magazine. A member of the Wagga Wagga Writer's Writers, he enjoys stargazing and startling his cat with loud music.

**Andrew Purches** has had poetry published in *fourW*, *Blue Dog*, *Cha* and *Blackmail* and has had spoken word published as part of the Red Room

*Troubadours* cd anthology. He writes novels, short stories, plays and poetry and currently lives in Sydney.

**Amy Randell** is an aspiring graphic designer and photographer. She is currently studying a Bachelor of Creative Arts and Design Graphic Design

and Photography at Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga. She loves to experiment with the combination of image and design, trying to find unlikely yet interesting combinations of the two mediums.

**Caroline Reid** was a state finalist in the South Australian Poetry Slam in 2016

and an emerging writer in residence at the South Australian Writers Centre in the same year. She has had plays, stories and poems performed and published, and is currently working on her first novel, *No Place for Children*.

**Graham Rowlands** published his *Collected Poems* in 2009 but still enjoys writing a poem now and again.

**Rajith Savanadasa** is the author of the novel *Ruins*, which was shortlisted for the ALS Gold Medal and the Readings Prize for New Australian Fiction, and saw him named a Sydney Morning Herald Best Young Novelist.

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**Steven Sharman** is a graduate of Charles Sturt University Wagga Wagga, and currently lives in Sydney where he teaches secondary school English. When not teaching, Steven is writing and his work has been published in the last four editions of the *fourW* anthologies .

**Dorothy Simmons** is the author of a play and four Young Adult novels; she has also published a number of short stories, and was the 2015 winner of the FAW Marjorie Barnard award. She completed her PhD in Creative Writing

at Melbourne University in 2014 and her latest novel, *Living like a Kelly*, was launched at WAM 2015.

**Barnaby Smith** is a writer, poet and musician based in northern New

South Wales. His poetry has appeared in journals and anthologies both in

Australia and overseas, while as an arts and music journalist he is a regular contributor to many leading publications. Also a singer-songwriter, his first

album under the artist name Brigadoon will appear within the next year.

[www.seededelsewhere.com](http://www.seededelsewhere.com)

**Ian C Smith's** work has appeared in *Antipodes*, *Australian Book Review*, *Australian Poetry Journal*, *The Brasilia Review*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *The Stony Thursday Book*,

& *Two-Thirds North*. His seventh book is *wonder sadness madness joy*, Ginninderra (Port Adelaide). He lives in the Gippsland Lakes area of Victoria, Australia.

**Rob Walker** lives in the Mt Lofty Ranges near Adelaide, South Australia with his wife, cow, sheep, occasional grandchildren and rooms full of short stories and poetry which his wife threatens to throw out some day. He is tolerant of his grandchildren but generally short-tempered with everyone else.

**Biff Ward** is the author of the literary memoir *In My Mother's Hands* which was short-listed for the NSW Premier's Douglas Stewart Literary Prize for nonfiction 2015 and the WA premier's Prize for 2016, long-listed for The Stella Prize 2015 and winner of the Canberra Critics' Circle Award 2014 for nonfiction. Her novella *In 1974* was one of the winners of the Griffith Review novella competition 'Storied Lives' for 2017. In 1984, her ground-breaking

book *Father-Daughter Rape*, one of the first in the world about child sexual abuse, was published in the UK and the US. She is currently finalising her

memoir about the Vietnam War.

**Les Wicks** has performed for over 40 years at festivals, schools, prisons etc. He has been published in over 350 different magazines, anthologies and newspapers 158

across 28 countries in 13 languages. Les conducts workshops around Australia and runs Meuse Press which focuses on poetry outreach projects like poetry

published on buses and the surface of a river. His 13th book of poetry is *Getting By Not Fitting In* (Island, 2016). [leswicks.tripod.com/lw.htm](http://leswicks.tripod.com/lw.htm)

**Gail Willems** is a retired nurse, who swims, beach walks, does yoga, and likes

good shiraz. She has been published in Australia, United Kingdom, Belgium, and New Zealand in journals, magazines, anthologies, and on Writers Radio.

Gail has had haiku published in journals, anthologies, and translated and published in Chinese. Her first poetry collection *Blood Ties and Crack-Fed Dreams* was published by Ginninderra Press in 2013.

**Jena Woodhouse** in 2015 was awarded Creative Residencies at Camac Centre d'Art, Marnay-sur-Seine, France, and at the Australian Archaeological Institute at Athens, Greece. In May 2016 she was writer-in-residence at Booranga Writers'

Centre, Wagga, NSW, and she has received a place at the Tyrone Guthrie

Centre, Ireland, in September 2017. She is the author/compiler/translator of seven books in various genres.

**Mark Young** lives in a small town in North Queensland, and has been publishing poetry for almost sixty years. He is the author of over forty books, primarily text poetry but also including speculative fiction, vispo, and art history. Mark's work has been widely anthologized, and his essays and poetry translated into a number of languages. His most recent books are *Ley Lines* and *bricolage*, both from gradient books of Finland, *The Chorus of the Sphinxes*, from Moria Books in Chicago, and *some more strange meteorites*, from Meritage & i.e. Press, California

/ New York. A limited edition chapbook, *A Few Geographies*, was recently released by One Sentence Poems as the initial offering in their new range.

**Robyne Young** is an writer living in Albury, Australia. During her MA in Cultural and Creative Practice in 2013, one of her lecturers told her she was a poet. Despite this she persists in writing short and long fiction and non fiction and is currently working on a novella. Robyne has been published in a number of *fourW* anthologies, *ZineWest13*, *Seizure Flashers* and *Tincture Journal*. Her short story collections are *The Only Constant* and *The Basket and The Briefcase*.

Her poem, *No Room*, will be published in the Romanian-Australian anthology, *On The Wallaby Track* in March 2018. She also loves sharing her love and joy of



writing in creative writing workshops in her home town and surrounds.

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